BROWNING

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By

Elisabeth Luther Cary

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POET AND MAN

A SVRVEY

BY

ELISABETH LVTHER CARY

ILLVSTRATED

G·P·PVTNAM'S SONS

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

IN calling this book a "survey" I have meant to indicate the absence of any attempt at throwing new light upon Browning's already strongly illuminated work. I have used the word in its literal sense to express my intention of merely "looking over" the ground covered by his life and poetry, and the place the two seem to have occupied in the generation to which he belonged.

I have laid more stress upon criticisms by other than upon my personal views, holding, with the Rev. Mr. Ingham, that where "so much has been said, and that so well said," I could add little of value; but in sifting the mass of critical material that has gathered about Browning's poetry, I have, of course, been influenced by my own impression of him as well as by the authority of the critic.

When the adequate biography appears, it should be a very interesting book, answering a demand to which mine is not directed; but if I strengthen in any degree the feeling that Browning's poetry is to be read like that of other poets, not as a task but for the reader's pleasure, I shall be content.

E. L. C.

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CHAPTER I.

ANCESTRY AND YOUTH.

UNLIKE Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth, and like Keats, Browning is connected by his ancestry with what are called the lower classes of society. The earliest ancestor found for him through Dr. Furnivall's researches is Robert Browning I., born before 1700, and "ultimately head butler to Sir John Bankes, of Corfu Castle," in Dorsetshire. Interesting as it might be to emphasise this lineage in order to honour an obscure calling, it must be remembered that in 1700 the old ideals of domestic service had not entirely died out; the notion of degradation in connection with it coming in with the Revolution of 1688.[1] Before that time are numerous examples of servants of good family who were related to their employers.[2] Nothing seems to be known of Robert Browning I., save that he was

[1] See *Notes and Queries,* 6th S., IV., August 6, '81, page 111.

[2] In the Parish of Wedmore County, Somerset, is the record of the death on 11 April, 1517, of "Anna Browninge Cognata et famula Richardi Browninge," probably no connection of the eighteenth-century Browning, but not necessarily of better birth. (*Notes and Queries.*)

buried in woollen, a fact recorded in the Pentridge Registers and reminiscent of the old "Act for Burying in Woollen onely," framed "for the Encouragement of the Woolen Manufactures of the Kingdome." His son Thomas was an innkeeper, holding the lease of Woodyates Inn, on the London, Dorchester, and Exeter Road. Following Thomas came four Roberts in direct succession, including the poet's son. The line of Roberts has, in fact, been unbroken through the six generations, Thomas having had a brother Robert who died in childhood.

The poet's grandfather was a clerk in the Bank of England for over fifty years. Browning describes him as "an old gentleman with his gouty leg tucked up on a chair, much more anxious that his grandson should n't get near his toe, than delighted to see the budding author." In 1778 he married Margaret Tittle, a creole born in the West Indies. The word "creole," as applied in the West Indies, is defined as now meaning "any person, animal, or thing, born or grown in a hot Western colony," the birthplace of the parents being no longer of any importance, and no distinction being made between white and black blood.[1] Dr. Furnivall emphasises the possibility, to him "the certainty," that Browning's grandmother had dark blood in her, and suggests that this may have had something to do with Mr. Barrett's unjustifiable aversion to his daughter's marriage, he being himself a West Indian estate-owner. In view of

[1] See Dr. Furnivall's essay on Browning's ancestry.

Mr. Barrett's uniform attitude on the subject of marriage for his children (as fully explained in Mr. Kenyon's *Letters of Mrs. Browning*), the suggestion can hardly be accepted.

Browning's father was also a bank clerk, serving nearly as long as the grandfather, but not attaining to so high a post. He had scholarly tastes, and a variety of accomplishments, chief among them an ability to draw in a spirited fashion with very suggestive treatment of line, as the recently published caricatures by him fully testify. His grandson, Mr. Robert Barrett Browning, says that he used to draw in the evening "for the amusement of friends and young people, of whom he was particularly fond." He drew very rapidly, and kept it up, purely as an amusement, to the end of his life. He used for his materials whatever came in his way, "old pencil-ends and scraps of paper—even pebbles on the seashore." His grandson adds that he "never pretended to be an artist, although he knew all the bones and muscles of the human body, their form as well as their names, by heart," and was "fond of drawing skeletons and skulls."[1] From some reminiscences by his brother Reuben we get an idea of his bookishness, which was not at all of the dryasdust character. "The love of reading attached him by sympathy to books," his brother writes; "old books were his delight, and, by his continual search

[1] See article on "Robert Browning, the Elder, as a Caricaturist," by F. G. Kitton; *The Art Journal.*

after them, he not only knew all the old bookstalls in London, but their contents, and if any scarce work were spoken of, he could tell forthwith where a copy of it could be had — nay, he would even describe in what part of the shop it was placed, and the price likely to be asked for it. Thus his own library became his treasure. His books, however, were confessedly not remarkable for costly binding, but for their rarity or for some interesting remarks he had to make on most of them ; and his memory was so good that not unfrequently, when a conversation at his table had reference to any particular subject, has he quietly left the room, and in the dark, from a thousand volumes in his library, brought two or three illustrative of the point under discussion."[1]

It has also been said of him that his detective faculty amounted to genius, and another story which, though not very significant, seems to be valued by his chroniclers, affirms that he always walked to and from the bank, and during his long service was only once late ; that being on the morning of the execution of Mr. and Mrs. Manning, when he could not get through the crowd in the Borough Road.

In the poem "Development" is a picture, that cannot be improved upon, of the relations between father and son during the first impressionable years of the poet's life :

> My Father was a scholar and knew Greek.
> When I was five years old, I asked him once

[1] See *The Art Journal*, February, 1896.

"What do you read about?"
"The siege of Troy."
"What is a siege and what is Troy?"
Whereat
He piled up chairs and tables for a town,
Set me a-top for Priam, called our cat
—Helen, enticed away from home (he said)
By wicked Paris, who couched somewhere close
Under the footstool, being cowardly,
But whom—since she was worth the pains, poor puss—
Towzer and Tray,—our dogs, the Atreidai,—sought
By taking Troy to get possession of
—Always when great Achilles ceased to sulk,
(My pony in the stable)—forth would prance
And put to flight Hector—our page-boy's self.
This taught me who was who and what was what;
So far I rightly understood the case
At five years old: a huge delight it proved
And still proves—thanks to that instructor sage
My Father, who knew better than turn straight
Learning's full glare on weak-eyed ignorance,
Or, worse yet, leave weak eyes to grow sand-blind,
Content with darkness and vacuity.

Mr. Frederick Locker in a letter to Browning after his father's death, begged him to draw up a slight sketch that should introduce to the world that interesting personality. "Perhaps he was shy," Mr. Locker wrote: "at any rate he was much less known than he ought to have been; and now, perhaps, he only remains in the recollection of his family and of one or two superior people (like myself!) who were capable of appreciating him."[1]

All this makes it easy to trace Browning's inheritance of genial temperament, love for books, keen

[1] See Mrs. Orr's *Life and Letters of Robert Browning.*

intuitions, imaginative ardour, and so on ; and gives credibility to his own grateful acknowledgment of his father's influence : "He secured for me all the ease and comfort that a literary man needs to do good work," he said. "It would have been shameful if I had not done my best to realise his expectations of me." It is also true, however, that Browning senior possessed some traits not so desirable to transmit. His over-emotional temperament, that made it easy for him to throw himself into the play of a child, made it equally easy for him to forget his dignity in more important situations. There is evidence enough in Browning's work, without the aid of external facts, that his own temperament was not less ardent, and it is the more to his credit that he ruled himself with strenuous regard for the vital and permanent interests of character. He was helped, doubtless, by the balance struck through his mother's strong ascetic instincts. She was the daughter of William Wiedemann, a shipowner and a Hamburg German settled in Dundee. The theory of a Jewish strain reaching the poet through his mother, or his father either, is not thought tenable by Dr. Furnivall, although the question has been violently debated and can hardly be considered closed. Certainly no clear evidence of such a strain has yet been produced, and the inferences are decidedly against its existence. With the mixture of creole, Scotch, German, and Anglo-Saxon, nothing more was needed to provide a poetic nature with source of emotional supplies. Browning's grand-

J W Alexander
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father, on his mother's side, strengthened the artistic element in his ancestry by his marked talent for both drawing and music.

Robert Browning, fifth of the name, was born on 7th May, 1812, in the parish of St. Giles, Camberwell, a suburb of London. The family were probably then living on Southhampton Street, described as "a long straggling street, starting with an air of gentility from the Peckham Road, but deteriorating at the other end." Although Camberwell has made little impression upon Browning's poetry, there is no doubt he found it a good place to grow up in. When somebody once advanced the opinion that only in Italy could one look for romance, he replied, "Ah, well! I should like to include poor old Camberwell"[1]; and in *Pauline,* he writes with the sentiment of extreme youth:

> As life wanes, all its care and strife and toil
> Seem strangely valueless, while the old trees
> Which grew by our youth's home, the waving mass
> Of climbing plants heavy with bloom and dew,
> The morning swallows with their songs like words,
> All these seem clear and only worth our thoughts:

The region must have been fairly picturesque in the early part of the century when the green fields were not far away. Ruskin, in *Præterita,* gives a charming picture of the view from Herne Hill, which was, he says, "before the railroads came, entirely lovely." One of its attractions, and the one which

[1] See Biographical Introduction to the Camberwell Edition of Browning's poems.

most appealed to Browning, was the woodland near Dulwich, where, during his early years, he often walked at night and sometimes till the very dawn.

An old handbook[1] records the healthfulness of the Peckham district in which his boyhood was spent, the winds blowing from the south toward London for more than three-fourths of the year, and keeping the air as pure as if the situation were far removed from the city. To substantiate this reputation, a remarkable list is given of Camberwell people who lived to a great age, about a dozen passing the century limit by several years. The place also adds its item or two to literary history. It was at Peckham that Goldsmith lived, a "heavy, dull-looking, mild-mannered usher in Dr. Milner's academy, and at Dulwich, the neighbouring district, Byron was put to school. Browning himself was sent—when he was about ten years old and already engaged in a mad affair of the heart—to Mr. Ready's school opposite Rye Lane, where he stayed until he was fourteen. It was, no doubt, the best school available, but the distinctive part of his education took place at home, where he found fine old books, many of them in their first editions, frequently with extra pages of his father's comments, notes, and so forth, bound in. Mrs. Orr speaks of Quarles's *Emblêmes* as his earliest favourite, and of *Robinson Crusoe* and Milton's works, first editions; of Bernard Mandeville's *Bees;* of the original

[1] *Collections Illustrative of the Geology, History, Antiquities, and Associations of Camberwell and the Neighbourhood,* by Douglas Allport, 1841.

pamphlet, *Killing No Murder,* which Carlyle borrowed for his *Life of Cromwell;* of ancient Bibles, and so on; a literary grove in which he paced with as much pleasure as through the lovely woods of Camberwell.

When he was eight years old he read Pope's translation of Homer and liked it, and about the same time translated the simpler odes of Horace. He tried, of course, verse-making on his own account, but Mr. Sharp declares it to be quite certain that none of these early essays, which have been "preserved without the poet's knowledge, and against his will," contains anything of genuine promise. A little volume of manuscript, which he called "Incondita," was stitched together when he was twelve years old and shown to his mother, who handed it on to some of her friends. Miss Flower (Sarah Flower Adams) and the Rev. William Johnson Fox were among this first public, and found the volume interesting. Through this dangerous experience the child passed with apparent immunity. No publisher was cajoled, and the volume was presently destroyed. At this time Browning was probably under the influence of Byron, but he had his Byronic attack so young as to escape any unpleasant sequelæ, and he was already preparing the way for the interest in music and painting, which makes his poetry on those subjects alive with technicalities and different from any that has been written by any other English poet. Mrs. Orr reports that he studied music under

two masters. Mr. John Relfe, "author of a valuable work on counterpoint," instructed him in thorough bass, and Mr. Abel, a pupil of Moscheles, taught him execution. He never studied painting in any very serious fashion; but while he lived in Peckham he was within easy reach of the Dulwich College with its permanent exhibition of the "Bourgeois Gallery of Paintings." The name is derived from the founder and does not indicate mediocre merit on the part of the pictures, which include, in the language of the Camberwell chronicler: "Several pleasing pictures by Teniers; some good portraits and idealities by Vandyke; a number of sweet effects by Claude, Both, and Ruysdael; a variety of poetical pieces by N. Poussin, and a few monstrosities and vulgarisms by Rubens, in his usual ship-carver's style."

A few years under the age at which contact with Spenser struck fire from Keats, Browning fell under the influence of Shelley and of Keats himself. Both were dead, but both were Browning's contemporaries. Born, one in 1792, and the other in 1795, they had lived in the same period and had written the mental experiences of natures not so very far removed from Browning's own. Zeal and ferment, and above these the clear intellectual vision, were common to all three, and it is no marvel at all that when Browning picked up at a bookstall a miserable pirated edition of *Mr. Shelley's Atheistical Poem: very scarce,* he should at once have responded to the new note of youth and artistic supremacy. Still too much a boy to hunt

things out for himself, he begged his mother to get him Shelley's works ; and, after a considerable search, Mrs. Browning procured from Ollier's a packet of books containing most of Shelley's writings, "all in their first edition, with the exception of *The Cenci.*" Mr. Ollier, with acute judgment, had included three volumes of Keats, with the assurance that he and Shelley were kindred poets. "If that packet had been lost," Mr. Sharp reflects, "we should not have had *Pauline;* we might have had a different Browning." Mrs. Orr declines to accord either Shelley or Keats any important part in forming Browning's genius ; but there is little doubt that the first writer who has power to bend the twig of the young impulse is in some degree responsible for the inclination of the grown tree.

Certainly Shelley's ideas, or, to put it more precisely, the temper of the mind producing those ideas, called forth an answer from the immature intelligence not contradicted in later years. And, with Browning, to comprehend and to sympathise was to love and to render homage. The apostrophe in *Pauline,* beginning,

> Sun-treader, life and light be thine forever !

has an ardour far surpassing most acknowledgments from pupil to master. The familiar *Memorabilia* ("Ah, did you once see Shelley plain !") vividly communicates the magnetic thrill with which the name of Shelley was heard on the lips of one who had spoken

with him and cared nothing for the experience. To Browning the bare reminiscence was "the moulted feather, the eagle feather," infinitely to be cherished. And when we come to the prose essay written in 1852, to accompany a series of unedited letters, supposed to be by Shelley (afterward discovered to be spurious), we are able to measure more accurately the depth of Browning's essential sympathy with the young rebellious soul of the earlier poet. This paragraph, the concluding one, shows how enduring the feeling was, and how fresh, after twenty years:

"It is because I have long held these opinions in assurance and gratitude, that I catch at the opportunity offered to me of expressing them here; knowing that the alacrity to fulfil an humble office conveys more love than the acceptance of the honour of a higher one, and that better, therefore, than the signal service it was the dream of my boyhood to render to his fame and memory, may be the saying of a few inadequate words upon these scarcely more important supplementary letters of Shelley."[1]

The opinions "long held in assurance and gratitude," and expressed at the age of forty when Browning was in his full maturity of power and experience, are worth consideration not merely for their value as criticism; but because they offer a clue, more or less unconsciously given, to Browning's own ideals, and to the deeper springs of his thought and

[1] Quoted from the *Essay on Shelley* as reproduced in the Appendix to the Cambridge Edition of Browning's *Complete Poetic and Dramatic Writings.*

action. In admirable and lucid prose the spirit of all his poetry speaks when he calls Shelley "a moral man, because he was true, simple-hearted, and brave, and because what he acted corresponded to what he knew"; when he calls him "a man of religious mind, because every audacious negative cast up by him against the Divine was interpenetrated with a mood of reverence and adoration"; when he refuses to confound with real infidelity and atheism of the heart the "passionate, impatient struggles of a boy towards distant truth and love, made in the dark, and ended by one sweep of the natural seas before the full moral sunrise could shine out on him." The wild impulse by which Shelley plunged from mistake to mistake, apparently at the mercy of caprice, he explains with the curious reasonableness which is found to balance his most passionate intuitions. Shelley's "early fervour and power to *see,*" he says, "was accompanied by as precocious a fertility to *contrive;* he endeavoured to realise as he went on idealising; every wrong had simultaneously its remedy, and out of the strength of his hatred for the former, he took the strength of his confidence in the latter—till suddenly he stood pledged to the defence of a set of miserable little expedients, just as if they represented great principles, and to an attack upon various great principles, really so, without leaving himself time to examine whether because they were antagonistical to the remedy he had suggested, they must, therefore, be identical or even essentially connected

with the wrong he sought to cure,—playing with blind passion into the hands of his enemies, and dashing at whatever red cloak was held forth to him, as the cause of the fireball he had last been stung with,—mistaking Churchdom for Christianity, and for marriage, 'the sale of love' and the law of sexual oppression."

This is Browning's method of interpretation, "to see a good in evil, a hope in ill-success," a method somewhat above ordinary human standards. He formulates it in *Abt Vogler* from the subjective standpoint:

> Thoughts hardly to be packed
> Into a narrow act,
> Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
> All I could never be,
> All, men ignored in me,
> This I was worth to God whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Applied to Shelley, it changes the conception of him as a weak revolutionist, to a conception of him as a strong nature broken in the making, an uncompleted whole, the fragments of which had had no chance for co-ordination. Right or wrong, it is an interpretation that leans to the nobler side of judgment, and expresses the extraordinary generosity of Browning's attitude toward apparent failure.

And now, before passing to a consideration of Browning's own creative work, it will be interesting to observe one more passage from his essay on Shelley, a passage that perfectly applies to himself,

and that seems to justify any sincere attempt to connect his life with his work. After defining the interest to be found in the biography of "an objective poet, as the phrase now goes," he continues:

"We turn with stronger needs to the genius of an opposite tendency — the subjective poet of modern classification. He, gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the Supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth — an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees — the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand — it is toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do; and he digs where he stands — preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. Such a poet does not deal habitually with the picturesque groupings and tempestuous tossings of the forest trees, but with their roots and fibres naked to the chalk and stone. He does not paint pictures and hang them on the walls, but rather carries them on the retina of his own eyes; we must look deep into his human eyes to see those pictures on them. He is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner, and

what he produces will be less a work than an effluence. That effluence cannot be easily considered in abstraction from his personality—being indeed the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated. Therefore, in our approach to the poetry, we necessarily approach the personality of the poet; in apprehending it we apprehend him, and certainly we cannot love it without loving him. Both for love's and for understanding's sake we desire to know him, and, as readers of his poetry, must be readers of his biography also."

Perhaps this, after all, is the most permanent debt that Browning owes to Shelley; the first realisation that poetry may be the expression of the human soul at its most characteristic moments, that drama need not be an affair of scenes and puppets, but may be the struggle and progression of emotions and convictions in that inner theatre of the mind, which is for one observer only.

CHAPTER II.

PAULINE, PARACELSUS, AND SORDELLO.

THE immediate influence of Shelley on Browning was stimulating but somewhat confusing. He seems for a time to have professed atheism and practised vegetarianism (the "couple of years or more on bread and potatoes," to which he alludes in a letter to Miss Barrett); but he soon gave up the latter on account of its effect upon his eyes, and the former certainly did not last long. If his strong self-consciousness found expression in manifestations that were doubtless absurd enough, his rapid development soon gave him dignity.

In 1845 he wrote to Miss Barrett that it was "not since yesterday nor ten nor twenty years before" that he had begun to look into his life and "study its end and requirements, what would turn to its good or its loss."

This looking into his life resulted in 1833 in a poem called *Pauline,* published anonymously by Saunders & Otley, his aunt bearing the expense. He had by this time definitely decided, with his father's approval, to become a poet by profession.

After leaving Mr. Ready's he had been no more to schools, pursuing his education at home; but in 1829–30 he had attended Professor Long's Greek class, at the University of London, where a fellow-student remembers him as held in esteem and regard. He was then "a bright, handsome youth with long black hair falling over his shoulders." There was at the moment some thought of his studying for the Bar, and even fifteen years later we read of "dear foolish old Basil Montagu," now and then "bothering" him to read law with him gratis, but the impulse toward poetry was much too strong to be put down. He began, not precisely in the orthodox poetic fashion, by reading and inwardly digesting Johnson's dictionary.

Pauline's first appearance was made as "a large old-fashioned duodecimo volume of three sheets, its pages measuring, when uncut, $7\frac{3}{4}$ x $4\frac{7}{8}$ inches." In this poem of ten hundred and thirty lines Browning plunges boldly into his element. Apple blossoms are not more unlike the fruit than the early poems of most poets are unlike the late, but with Browning the tendencies were visibly shaped in the germ, and for this reason, if for no other, *Pauline* is interesting to those who read his poetry.

The preface is, characteristically, a Latin quotation from a treatise on occult philosophy by Henry Cornelius Agrippa, the French physician and astrologer, headed by a couple of lines from the Norman-French poet Marot:

I am no longer what I was,
Nor may I be the same again.[1]

The poem itself is a drama of the inner life with no events save those that take place in the mind. From the start the average reader will strike on most of the rocks of the so-called "Browning obscurity," one of the most obstructive being his habit of taking for granted a good deal of somewhat out-of-the-way knowledge on the part of the public.

We are no sooner well launched than we need our notes to remind us, if not to inform us, that "a giant standing vast in the sunset," is Atlas; that Nestor was the "high-crested chief," who sailed "with troops of friends to Tenedos;" that Agamemnon was he who "trod the purple calmly to his death," and so forth. Doubtless classical allusions are more familiar to English readers of poetry than to American. They strew the debates of the House of Commons while they smack of pedantry in those of Congress, and if Browning won his way sooner on this side of the water it was despite his learned allusions, classical and other, not because of them. They remain, as he employs them, an appreciable obstacle to the ready enjoyment of him by the general reader, increasing from the comparatively slight difficulties of *Pauline* to those of *Ferishtah's Fancies* and the *Parleyings*.

Certainly none of the spirit of classic poetry dwelt in this first poem, or in any poem that he ever wrote.

[1] *Plus ne suis ce que j'ai été,*
Et ne le sçaurois jamais être.

He did not look as the Greeks looked upon the visible world, to depict with static serenity the external features of nature. He plunged with an impulse more like that of the Hebraic writers into the depths of the concealed life, the life of the human soul which we most of us do all we can to keep out of sight, so it is not surprising that *Pauline* failed to attract popular attention. Had it been much more perfectly wrought it would still have had to reckon with the instinctive opinion of the Anglo-Saxon people that it is not "good form" to talk so much about one's feelings.

It was not, however, entirely neglected. It was reviewed in *The Monthly Repository* by Mr. Fox, who praised it with the full courage of his convictions and found in it the promise of genius. A review in *The Athenæum,* characterised by Mrs. Orr as "bald though well-meant," certainly contradicts her statement that "one only" (Mr. Fox) discovered Browning in his obscurity; the reviewer declaring the faults of the poem—"a touch of the mysterious," now and then "a want of true melody," a certain abruptness—to be no more than "a grain of sand in a cup of pure water, compared to the nature and passion and fancy" displayed.

On the adverse side may be noted a review in *Fraser's Magazine,* interesting only as an example of a style of criticism much in vogue at the time.

It begins: "'Non dubito quin titulus,' etc., quotes the author of *Pauline,* from Cornelius Agrippa; which we, shearing the sentence of its lengthy continuation,

translate thus: 'We are under no kind of doubt about the title to be given to you, my poet, you being beyond all question as mad as Cassandra, without any of the power to prophesy like her, or to construct a connected sentence like anybody else.'" The reviewer continues by expressing his opinion that *Pauline* is "the production of one or all of the Whig ministers," since the "same folly, incoherence, and reckless assertion" distinguished their pamphlet on the Reform Ministry and the unfortunate poem under consideration. A frivolous, but rather clever adaptation is made of certain lines to the political history of the Cabinet, and the notice closes with a quotation which, torn from its context, fairly justifies its condemnation as a "raving" apostrophe to place.

The best proof that *Pauline,* seen whole, is thoroughly Browningesque in its virtues and vices, is furnished by Rossetti's recognition of its authorship after it had lain twenty years in anonymous obscurity. Browning himself was not proud of it, calling it "foolish and *not* boylike." With the latter accusation it is impossible to disagree. The poem was not boylike nor was it manlike. Its morbid immaturity must be recognised fairly to estimate the great, the almost marvellous advance from *Pauline* to *Paracelsus.*

Paracelsus was written in 1835, when Browning was only twenty-three, and Dr. Berdoe thinks it the work that posterity will probably estimate as Browning's greatest. This opinion will find few supporters. What Mr. Stedman calls the "tedious garrulity" of

the poem is a defect that will not be less obvious with the passage of time. The subject will demand to the end innumerable notes and explanations; and the great majority of readers will be repelled by the "problems" unrelieved by the "picture." In *Pippa Passes* we see the gay child on her holiday, up at dawn, looking out of her window at the sunrise, wandering in sheer joy of indolence through the streets, stooping to pick heart's-ease in the intervals of her singing. In Pompilia's monologue (*The Ring and the Book*) we see the girl of seventeen, two weeks a mother, and as white as the poor clay Virgin to whom she had given her roses; even in *Fifine at the Fair,* most metaphysical of riddles, we have no difficulty in forming a mental picture of Elvire with her grave eyes and web of brown hair as opposed to "pert Fifine." But in *Paracelsus,* in spite of the fact that we know and understand the characters through their thoughts, we *see* nothing at all. Neither Paracelsus himself, nor Festus, nor Michal, nor Aprile, is a creature of body and blood. This shuts *Paracelsus* out from among the great poems of the world, and forbids us to call it the "greatest" even of Browning's own.

Professor Royce has compared it to the poems of the Faust cycle and has included it among them.[1] The resemblances are many and obvious. Paracelsus was a contemporary of Faustus the Younger, the prototype of Goethe's hero, and like him in-

[1] See article on "The Problems of Paracelsus," in *The New World,* March, 1894.

quisitive of knowledge in every form conceivable. "The absence of an external tempter," says Professor Royce, "in no wise excludes the poem from the Faust cycle; for the tempter in most such creations is but the hero's other self, given a magical and plastic outer reality, as with Manfred.

"As regards the positive aspects of the analogy, the typical hero of a poem of the Faust cycle is a man of the Renaissance, to whom the Church is no authority, and to whom the world is magically full either of God's or of Satan's presence, or of both.

"This hero risks his soul in a quest for some absolute fulfilment of pleasure, power, wisdom, or peace. Thus staking everything, he gets, like an early voyager to the New World, either the doom of the outlaw or the glories of the conquistador; but meanwhile he comes near, if he does not meet, an evil end in the abyss."

If we examine, however briefly, the life of the real Paracelsus, we see how he touches on these various sides the "typical hero." He was born at Einsiedeln, near Zurich, in 1493, twenty years later than Copernicus, ten years later than Luther, one year after the discovery of America, at a time when curiosity was invading the thoughtful minds of Europe and stimulating them to investigation and invention. His name was Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim.

His father, William Bombast von Hohenheim, was a physician, and instructed him in surgery,

medicine, and alchemy. He studied philosophy under several masters, and chiefly under Trithemius of Spanheim, Abbot of Wurzburg, and an adept in the occult studies.

The influence of Trithemius turned his mind toward magic and astrology ; but he differed from most of the mystics of his time in that mysticism did not occupy his thoughts to the exclusion of practical ideas. "True alchemy," he said, "has but one aim and object, to extract the quintessence of things and to prepare arcana, tinctures, and elixirs which may restore to man the health and soundness he has lost."

Even his bitterest opponents have granted the value of his works on surgery. He "discovered the metals zinc and bismuth and hydrogen gas, and the medical uses of many minerals, the most important of which were mercury and antimony. He gave to medicine the greatest weapon in her armoury—opium."

He worked among peasants and miners, soldiers and prisoners, travelling far and labouring with his hands in order to establish the principles by which he held. When he was given the chair of physical science at Basle (the first incumbent of such a chair), he began by casting aside in magnificent arrogance of conviction the old sacred books of medicine, denouncing the doctrines of his predecessors with no concern for modesty or moderation.

As he says in the poem :

I think my class will not forget the day
I let them know the gods of Israel,
Aëtius, Oribasius, Galen, Rhasis,
Serapion, Avicenna, Averröes,
Were blocks !

Compromise was absolutely foreign to his spirit. He was reckless in condemning the methods of contemporary physicians and the self-seeking practices of apothecaries. Moreover, he cured the sick poor without taking a fee, a crime against professional etiquette of that age, and as Luther preached spiritual truths in the vulgar tongue, so did he lecture in language to be understanded of the people. He has been called a drunkard, and Browning admits—too freely according to Dr. Berdoe's arguments—the charge of drunkenness. He was proud, violent, foolish with many of the follies of his time, rough in speech, extravagant in theory, possibly given to license, and possibly, too, a little mad ; but he saw the gleam of the scientific method through the close-shut bars of traditional superstition and ignorance.

His doctrine of "signatures" was one of his absurdities, leading him to prescribe euphrasy for troubles of the eye because the flower of the euphrasy plant resembles an eye, and mulberries for blood diseases because of their colour. This was a side on which he touched the misguided past ; on the other hand, he reached out to the future in his *Primum Ens Sanguinis,* an anticipation of the operation called "fusion," the "venous injection of blood from the arm of a 'healthy young person.'"

His cosmology and theosophical beliefs are too complicated to be sketched in a paragraph, but one clause of his creed—his conviction that the external man is "not the real man, but the real man is the soul in connection with the Divine Spirit"—is no more nor less than the essence of Buddhism, of Christianity, of modern Theosophy, and even of such faith as the agnostic mind permits itself.

Browning's commentators have some of them insisted upon the remarkable prevision shown in *Paracelsus* of scientific truths since proclaimed to the world by Darwin and Spencer. Such passages as that in which Paracelsus describes the ascent of man toward the moment

> When all mankind alike is perfected
> Equal in full-blown powers,

seem to them practically an account of the evolutionary principle of development from the simple to the complex, from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous.

Much of this philosophy is found, as Dr. Berdoe has shown, in the actual teachings of the Kabala, in which Paracelsus was learned, and may be considered as reflecting thoughts expressed by the real Paracelsus in his writings; and some of it is due to the poetic imagination, which reveals to poets and to scientists as well, vast possibilities eagerly to be sung by the former, and patiently investigated and substantiated by the latter. As Mr. J. L. Jones says in his remarkable paper on *The Uncalculating Soul:*

"The poet, by the 'tougher sinew' of his brain, the more penetrating grasp of his mind, reaches the synthesis which his sure ally and best friend, the man of science, will, give him time enough, justify by analysis."

Not the remnants of superstition that he retained, but the reforms he initiated prevented Paracelsus from gaining the honour of his contemporaries. He was bold enough to heal without the aid of the Church, he saved the life of a prince, incidentally throwing some discredit on the efficacy of a relic of the Blessed Virgin ; he cured a wealthy priest so speedily that his demand for his fee was judged impertinence, and so he was chased out of Basle, and servants of his enemies attacked him, causing him a fall, from the effects of which he died in the Salzburg Hospital, at the age of forty-eight.

The type is one that has a dignity of heroism not to be won by victims of glorious accident. Like Columbus, like Luther, like Galileo, Paracelsus followed the truth under the weight of all the world's contempt. There was no showy martyrdom, no thrilling incident to ring like a reveillé in the history of fine deeds ; nothing but misunderstanding, disappointment, ingratitude, and the strength to bear them given by the consciousness that an idea, a conviction, was not under any conceivable circumstances to be sacrificed to popularity. To belong to this class of leaders—for it is one of the tardy compensations of life that at some time, by someone, they are almost

certain to be recognised as leaders—is to belong to the men of sorrows whose crucifixion comes long before their recognition as the saviours of the world.

According to Dr. Berdoe, Browning did more than anyone else, more than physicians or chemists or historians, to establish a just idea of the service rendered by Paracelsus to humanity. "Up to the time when, in 1835, Mr. Browning wrote his poem, *Paracelsus,*" Dr. Berdoe says, "the world had nothing but a distorted image of the hero, which was in fact little better than a caricature drawn by his bitter enemies. Mr. Browning's vast research amongst contemporary records has enabled him to put together—like Professor Owen with his prehistoric bones—a consistent and faithful figure of the real man. When Mr. Browning says, in the notes appended to the poem, that the liberties he has taken with his subject are very trifling, we now know this to be the fact because we have access to the documents which confirm his estimate of the hero's life. In all history it would be difficult to find another character which has been so slandered and misrepresented as that of Paracelsus."

The difference between Browning's reconstructed figure of the sixteenth-century physician and Professor Owen's prehistoric man lies in the fact that Browning not only put his anatomical parts together with scientific accuracy, but also informed them with the spirit of life, so that the hero of his poem becomes as much a subject for our vital sympathies as

the man who lives and suffers within the range of our actual experience.

What was the drama enacted in the mind of this complex Paracelsus, and how did the tragedy develop? The struggle goes on between Knowledge and Love; but Professor Royce pertinently reminds us that "nobody who has a nature on the human level ever lives by either the intellect alone or the affections alone. Every rational being both 'knows' and 'loves,' if by these words be meant only the bare abstractions called the 'pure intellect' and the 'affections.'" The question is, What does he know and what does he love? Paracelsus is shown to be not a strenuous devotee of one branch of knowledge, but a man of intuitions, "no admirer of the so-called 'cold intellect,' but a passionate mystic; no steadily progressive student busied with continuous systematic researches, but a restless wanderer; no being of clear-cut ideas, but a dreamer." He is an "occult Idealist," and looks for the revelation of the divine in strange places and in physical signs and wonders. When Aprile counsels him to use his knowledge for the sake of mankind he tries to do so without coming in the slightest degree nearer to the heart of man. He is a failure because he is not in sympathy with human kind, because he has not suffered with their sufferings or shared their ideals, his own life has been shut off from theirs by his imperious sense of superiority and remoteness. When he finally "attains" it is because he sees God revealed in the human soul

and not in the physical world; because he interrogates the moral world for such truth as he had formerly expected to find miraculously revealed in the stars and the plants. He has followed the line of evolution at last to what seems its termination in the moral nature of the human creature.[1]

The poem has been called the problem of the Mind and Heart, and Paracelsus himself recognises some such analogy in his words to Aprile:

> —We must never part.
> Are we not halves of one dissevered world,
> Whom this strange chance unites once more? Part? never!
> Till thou, the lover, know, and I, the knower,
> Love—until both are saved.

And again, in his dying rhapsody:

> —Let men
> Regard me, and the poet dead long ago
> Who loved too rashly; and shape forth a third
> And better-tempered spirit, warned by both.

For this particular interpretation of the temperament of Paracelsus there is no very clear justification in his actual history. With all his obvious faults he seems to have been unusually warm-hearted and sympathetic. The assumption, however, enabled Browning to embody in his first important poem the chief article of his creed which he was never in any instance to deny; the revelation, that is, of the divine through the human.

It was natural that at twenty-three he should

[1] See article on "The Problems of Paracelsus"; *The New World*, March, 1894.

contrast in his own mind his ideal, then recently formed, of Shelley, ardent for the redemption of suffering humanity, with his ideal of Paracelsus, for whose wisdom he had conceived so profound a respect, for the satisfaction of working out a dramatic theory. His next long poem, *Sordello,* shows him preoccupied with a somewhat systematic attempt at constructing a picture of man's mental life by combining and contrasting the forces which we call intellect and will and passion. As these forces are more clearly perceived when each is personified by an individual temperament, the obvious resort was to seek models in history and make them typical.

Paracelsus was treated not much better than *Pauline* by the reviews. Ten years after its first appearance, Browning wrote to Miss Barrett that, until Forster's notice of it appeared in *The Examiner,* every journal that thought it worth alluding to at all treated it with entire contempt, *The Athenæum* hastening to say that it was "not without talent, but spoiled by obscurity and only an imitation of Shelley!"

A public arose, however, made up not of "impudent reviewers," but of literary men of such standing as Wordsworth, Landor, Dickens, etc. Among the friends of the poem was William Macready the actor, who was strongly attracted by Browning, and soon after making his acquaintance said to him: "Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America." Browning quickly re-

sponded : "Shall it be historical and English ? What do you say to a drama on Strafford ?" This conversation took place at a dinner given at Serjeant Talfourd's after the performance of *Ion*. The honour that fell to Browning was Talfourd's request that, as "the youngest of the poets of England," he should respond to the toast, "The Poets of England." As Wordsworth and Landor were present it was no slight tribute, and must have compensated for a good deal of neglect in other quarters.

The notion of a Strafford play was presently carried out ; but *Sordello* had already been begun, although it was not finished until after *Strafford* had been written and put upon the stage. In spite of this interruption it properly belongs to the *Paracelsus* period.

"Readers and even students shy at *Sordello,*" says the Dean of St. Paul's. Let us examine the reason. In the first place, the poet darts back three centuries earlier than Paracelsus, and introduces the reader to ancient Mantua at a time when suffering and crime stalked through Northern Italy making it truly an "inn of grief."

This period of strife between Guelph and Ghibelline, of Courts of Love and troubadours, of license and vice and petty ambitions under a cloak of curiously seductive romance, is well enough known in its general outlines, but by no means well enough known by any but the special student to make a poem, filled as *Sordello* is filled with historical hints and implica-

tions, anything but a despair, unless the thread of connection is plainly visible and the background of events broadly and clearly painted.

That Browning provided this thread and this background for the benefit of his reader (and especially, it would seem, for his own benefit), even his closest sympathiser and most ardent admirer declines to admit. In one of Miss Barrett's letters to him she complains that its connections and associations hang as loosely as those in a dream, to the confusion of the reader "who persists in thinking himself awake." Browning at one time considered rewriting it, but the most he ever did was to supply descriptive headings in the edition of 1863, by which material aid is certainly given to a consecutive idea of the plot.

After this difficulty of keeping in mind the relation of the events described to each other, and to other events not mentioned, comes the problem of discovering Sordello's personality through the extraordinarily complicated key furnished by his excursive mental processes. As in *Paracelsus*, Browning went back of the great characters of history to one less known and less appreciated.

Sordello is a troubadour, forerunner of Dante ("thy forerunner, Florentine!"), and the same of whom Dante writes in *Purgatorio*. Little enough is known of the real Sordello, merely that he was "mentioned by his contemporary, Rolandin, who states that he eloped with Cuniza, wife of Count Richard de Saint Bonifazio, and sister of Ezzelino da

Romano. Some of his poems still survive, and from them a few more facts relating to the poet may be gleaned, and that is the whole of our real knowledge of him."[1]

There are various stories of his success in love and prowess in war concocted by later historians; but none of them can be verified. The only valuable testimony to indicate that Sordello was different from the plausible, wild-hearted, foolish, and gay singers who were his contemporaries comes from Dante's notice of him.

He is the spirit standing in "high, abstracted mood," the "shadow, in itself absorbed," who, hearing Virgil declaring his country to be Mantua, cries: "Mantuan! I am thy countryman, Sordello"; and seven times exchanges courteous greetings with him.

In a letter to Miss Barrett, Browning speaks of reading *Purgatorio* and being struck by a new significance in the first speech of the group to which Sordello belongs as "well describing the man and his purpose and fate" in his own poem.

This is the passage in Cary's translation:

> We all
> By violence died, and to our latest hour
> Were sinners, but then warn'd by light from heaven;
> So that, repenting and forgiving, we
> Did issue out of life at peace with God,
> Who, with desire to see him fills our hearts.

On such a slight framework Browning builds his

[1] See Berdoe's *Browning Encyclopedia*, p. 480.

hero, developing his soul according to a purely personal conception of the way in which the soul of a true poet placed in such an environment might develop. The narrative, not the dramatic, form is chosen for the poem, apparently with the idea of appeasing the critics. In the opening lines the poet deprecates the necessity of such a choice, but resigns himself with the protest :

> But it seems
> Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,
> Makers of quite new men, producing them,
> Would best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem
> The wearer's quality ; or take their stand,
> Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand,
> Beside him.

This comes near to pathos in view of the reputation *Sordello* has attained as the most involved, bewildering, and altogether wantonly incomprehensible poem ever written by Browning.

Dr. Berdoe calls *Sordello* Browning's *Hamlet,* and offers in defence of the difficulties " inseparable from the attempt to trace the development of a soul," the comment that " such a work without obscurity could only deal with a very simple soul."

Complex as Hamlet is, however, and subtle from the very trait that lies at the source of gordello's subtlety,—irresolution, weakness of will,—the temperament of the Danish prince imposes itself at once upon the imagination of the reader, who may or may not have the true conception of him, but who cannot fail to have a very strong impression.

Of Sordello, on the other hand, it is difficult to get any impression at all. If we read attentively and go back and read over again, we presently grasp the idea that he is first an eager boy, self-consciousness all astir within him, seeing himself a conqueror in every field; that he finds his supremacy in the art of singing, and endangers his self-respect by lowering his ideal, courting popularity by cheapening his poetry; that he then responds to the exigent love bestowed upon him by Palma, who sees him as he once saw himself,—a doer of fine deeds; that the impulse of pity *awakes* within him urging him to espouse the cause of humanity, the cause at that moment of the Guelphs against the Ghibellines; that, face to face with the temptation of knowing himself made suddenly head of all the Ghibellines, the Imperial badge upon his neck, he struggles with this temptation, inclining now and again to yield and taste the joy of ruling, and doing good by ruling well, dallying with the dangerous uncertainty of the distinction between right and wrong; that finally he cuts the problem by flinging the badge to the ground, and dying at the moment of his renunciation.

His arrival at this ultimate crisis is deferred by many turnings of his mind upon itself, and it is sometimes a subject of wonder that so many words could be used without the illuminating phrase finding its way.

Mr. Browning himself had the idea that some of the thoughts in *Sordello* could not be spoken very

clearly—not easily, at least. And to a certain extent he was, of course, right. But there is a passage in the third book of *Sordello,* commencing :

> The common sort, the crowd,
> Exist, perceive; with Being are endowed,
> However slight, distinct from what they See,
> However bounded;

and ending :

> My own concern was just to bring my mind
> Behold, just extricate, for my acquist,
> Each object suffered stifle in the mist
> Which hazard, custom, blindness interpose
> Betwixt things and myself.

Compare it with the famous soliloquy in the fourth act of *Hamlet,* commencing,

> How all occasions do inform against me,

and the difference between direct statement and involved statement of self-analysis is at once perceived. With Hamlet the thought has been assimilated, and the expression is calm and adequate and in its essence unmistakable. Sordello, on the other hand, struggles, leaps from one image to another, and gives the effect not so much of strong self-absorption as of disordered nerves. Mr. Dowden, to be sure, declares that as a rule the style is "vigorously straightforward," but there are so many exceptions to this "rule," that the average mind is dominated by them in making its estimate of the poem.

Then there is again the perplexity so noticeable in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus;* the similes drawn from

Browning's well equipped mind, and doubtless so familiar to him as to seem to require no clarifying process, are frequently quite outside the range of a capacity much above that of the average—even of the average Browning reader!

Now, add grammatical peculiarities, elliptical constructions, inversions, and involutions, and a number of odd words, "*writhled* tongue," "*slither* through," "mollituous," "fastuous," "shent," "cautelous," "ginglingly," and so on; and the measure of *Sordello's* obscurity will be sufficiently suggested.

The next question to be asked is usually, "Does the reading of *Sordello,* under these adverse conditions, pay?"—a question which no intelligent reader would consent to have answered for him. It may, however, be said that the story of *Sordello* as Browning conceives it would be interesting if told in the plainest of prose (as it is told in half a dozen excellent commentaries); that there are passages of great beauty in the poem; that the thought when once perceived is seldom trivial, though not by any means always tremendous, and that the moral problem involved—the forcing of the will through intellectual sophistries to a definite choice between good and evil—is one of continual importance.

When Browning dedicated the 1863 edition to M. Milsand, he said of the poem:

"I wrote it twenty-five years ago for only a few, counting even in these on somewhat more care about its subject than they really had. My own

faults of expression were many, but with care for a man or book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either."

It is possible that "care for the man," for the later Browning of *Pippa Passes,* and of *Men and Women,* has done more than any change of popular taste to stimulate interest in *Sordello,* which is, after all, the product of boyhood.

CHAPTER III.

THE DRAMAS.

WHEN Browning laid aside *Sordello* in order to write a play for Macready he reaped from the momentary loss a lasting gain. It was the very moment at which he needed a controlling and restraining influence from without to keep him from spinning out of his own self-consciousness an interminable web of introspective philosophy.

He was confronted by the necessity of interesting an audience which could not be supposed to listen exclusively to monologues, but demanded interplay of events, the march of a thoroughly constructed plot, and the counterchange of different emotions. With these requirements in mind, he entered upon his apprenticeship as a playwright, missing this vocation to succeed the better as a dramatist for the discipline to which he submitted himself. His failure in writing for the stage was not due entirely, perhaps not chiefly, to the defects of his method.

At the very beginning misfortune attacked him. His first play, *Strafford,* ran triumphantly for a few

nights, successful in spite of a number of poor actors and a shabby setting. Then one of the leading actors deserted for higher pay, the play collapsed, and that opportunity was ended.

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon was written in five days' time, at the request of Macready, who professed himself delighted with it. But Macready was on the edge of a financial precipice and toppled over precisely at the moment for ruining Browning's second chance. These adventitious circumstances, and the fact that in spite of his best endeavours his plays, like his poems, were unfashionably metaphysical, furnished a sufficient explanation of his early discouragement in this field of activity. Undoubtedly he was in advance of his time.

In the half-century since passed, a notable change has taken place in public taste. Fifty years ago Ibsen had not yet written his first drama, and the majority of people interested in the theatre shared Mr. Berdoe's opinion that "an analytic poet is for the study, not for the boards." Those who feel differently still constitute a minority only of the great mass of playgoers; but the number has steadily increased. If today an actress who has made Ibsen acceptable should take the part of Mildred in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* or of the Duchess in *Colombe's Birthday,* she would not be forced to conquer a cold and puzzled audience; she would find one exceptionally interested in the play of character and in the nature of the problems therein involved.

There is indeed evidence that such an actress would have been received more sympathetically in the United States than in England. As early as 1854 Mr. Moncure D. Conway wrote of the scene at the close of the fourth act of *Colombe's Birthday:*

"I remember well to have seen a vast miscellaneous crowd in an American theatre hanging with breathless attention upon every word of this interview down to the splendid climax when, in obedience to the Duchess's direction to Valence how he should reveal his love to the lady she so little suspects to be herself, he kneels—every heart evidently feeling each word as an electric touch, and all giving vent at last to their emotion in round after round of hearty applause."

Mr. Sharp, defining the difference between Shakespeare's method and Browning's, seeks to prove that the method of each was "in profound harmony with the dominant sentiment of the age in which he lived." The Elizabethan age was "rich in romantic adventure of the mind as well as of the body, and above all others, save that of the Renaissance in Italy, animated by a passionate curiosity."

The Victorian age, on the other hand, has been "prolific of novel and vast Titanic struggles of the human spirit to reach those Gates of Truth whose lowest steps are the scarce discernible stars and farthest suns we scan, by piling Ossas of searching speculation upon Pelions of hardly-won positive knowledge." The "highest exemplar" of the former

age is Shakespeare," Browning the "profoundest interpreter of the latter"; and therefore criticism of Browning's dramas should be marked by "the ablation of the chronic Shakespearian comparison."

Professor Henry Jones is not inclined wholly to accept such a judgment. In an article on *Browning as a Dramatic Poet* he finds his too dominant and exclusive concern with moral problems to be a serious defect:

"Nothing has interest for him except right and wrong," he says. "This, no doubt, is his strength and the crown of his glory amongst the poets; it is also his weakness. He cannot forget the mighty issues which hang on paltry facts and passing thoughts; and life is to him 'all astrain.'

"He has a surpassingly quick eye for moral effects; for the consequences that reverberate endlessly in the world of spirit, darkening destiny into tragedy, and making even the movement of the Good awful in its magnitude; but he is generally blind to the lighter play of things,—to the fanciful idea that brings nothing but laughter in its train, to the emotion that only ripples the surface, to the inconsequence and incoherence, the oddities and inversions, in which Comedy, forgetting the stern rule of law, always revels."

Certainly in the Victorian age, as in the Elizabethan, happy accidents jostle the more significant events of life; fun and folly tread the same stage with passion; the smallest compensations and the common-

est satisfactions go side by side with great problems and great needs. Now, as then, the natural environment relieves the tension of tragic moments, and Shakespeare, as Professor Jones has said, lets "the common world come knocking at the door." That Browning does not, is hardly the fault of the age. If we may not hope for a Shakespeare to interpret our manifold social and individual life, we need not on that account deny the insufficiency of a less varied genius. Our introspective tendency and our concern for the moral law are vividly and powerfully represented in Browning's work; but many sides of our modern world he touches not at all; surely his critics serve him best when they recognise frankly that his mind was not sufficiently broad or inclusive to cover many aspects of the human comedy.

It would be absurd, of course, to assume that, because Browning wrote plays deficient in variety, he was not essentially a dramatic poet in the sense of representing human conduct under conditions that bring out its significance.

Stevenson's idea of "a good serious play" was that "it must be founded on one of the passionate *cruces* of life, where duty and inclination come nobly to the grapple," and no writer has answered this demand more consistently than Browning. In every one of his plays (as well as in the majority of his more important poems) there is not merely a moral problem but a moral struggle.

In *Strafford,* Wentworth must decide between

king and country, Pym between England's good and Wentworth's life ; in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* it is a question of love against family honour ; in *Colombe's Birthday,* the less fiery ordeal of choosing between a lover and a duchy ; in *The Return of the Druses,* truth against deception ; in *Luria,* loyalty to a cause against revenge. And in almost every case the choice is made sufficiently difficult to justify the struggle. Sin is depicted not as a monster of horrid mien, nor yet as an allegorical figure of inconceivable loveliness, but reasonable, convincing, interesting, and potent. To discover the parting of the ways frequently demands an intellectual vision so acute that the subsequent moral decision seems a matter almost of secondary importance.

This, certainly, is the quality that gives weight to Browning's influence as a moralist and puts him on the side of the great teachers as opposed to the conventional pedagogues. His face is set toward the high places, but never does he attempt to hearten his followers with factitious descriptions of a bright and flowery outlook. To win through is no contemptible triumph ; to fail is at least to have grappled with an enemy of grim resistance.

Exploration in this region of moral and intellectual obscurity, of subtle influences and complex issues, is not attempted by a simple mind. The proof of Browning's genius lies not in the fact that, like Childe Roland, he joined "the lost adventurers, his peers," to cross "bog, clay and rubble,

sand, and stark black dearth" in his search for the hidden truth about human nature, but in the fact that at the highest point of his achievement as a poet he pushed farther than others and revealed "as in a sheet of flame" the goal aspired to. We feel that the victory is his, despite the devious excursions of the plays and the longer monologues, in the passion and gravity and superb simplicity of the shorter poems that disclose his incontestable power. Through appalling perplexities he forced his way to the final vision: "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

In 1848 Lowell, writing of Browning's plays and poems, assigned him his place as a thinker because of his "eminent qualities as a dramatist," and explained himself in somewhat formal and boyish phrases which, nevertheless, throw light. He was himself fresh from study of the older dramatists, and his appreciation was rather more than mere literary judgment.

"This dramatic faculty," he says, "is a far rarer one than we are apt to imagine. It does not consist in a familiarity with stage effect, in the capacity for inventing and developing a harmonious and intricate plot, nor in an appreciation of passion as it reveals itself in outward word or action. It lies not in a knowledge of character so much as in an imaginative conception of the springs of it. Neither of these singly, nor all of them together without that unitary faculty which fuses the whole and subjects them all

to the motion of a single will, constitute a dramatist. . . . In his [Browning's] dramas we find always a leading design and a conscientious subordination of all the parts to it. In each one of them also, below the more apparent and exterior sources of interest, we find an illustration of some general idea which bears only a philosophical relation to the particular characters, thoughts, and incidents, and without which the drama is still complete in itself, but which yet binds together and sustains the whole, and conduces to that unity for which we esteem these works so highly.

"Many English dramas have been written within a few years, the authors of which have established their claim to the title of poet. We cannot but allow that we find in them fine thoughts finely expressed, passages of dignified and sustained eloquence, and as adequate a conception of character as the reading of history and the study of models will furnish. But it is only in Mr. Browning that we find enough of freshness, vigour, and grasp, and of that clear insight and conception which enable the artist to construct characters from within, and so to make them real things and not images as to warrant our granting the honour due to the Dramatist."[1]

To realise the essential justice of this discrimination it must be remembered that when we speak of the English "drama" of the first half of the present

[1] See April number of *The North American Review*, 1848.

century, we speak of something that had form but was void.

Bulwer's plays, *The Lady of Lyons* and *Richelieu* in particular, have shown the most staying quality, but aside from the hopelessly commonplace productions of Sheridan Knowles, Horne's *Cosmo* and *Orion,* and the *Ion* of Talfourd fairly represent the flower of that forgotten period—*Alieni temporis flores,* all of them. In ten years' time Browning himself was deprecating and excusing his youthful enthusiasm over *Ion* and Miss Barrett was comparing its "polished rhetoric" with the "living poetry" of *Luria*.

It was not surprising that Macready felt it would be "some recompense for the miseries, the humiliations, the heart-sickening disgusts" which he had endured in his profession" if he had succeeded in awakening in Browning "a spirit of poetry whose influence would elevate, ennoble, and adorn" the "degraded drama."

Browning was qualified for his *Strafford* by his work on Forster's *Life of Strafford*.[1] Just how much this work amounted to has not been precisely determined. Dr. Furnivall is quite certain that almost the whole of the *Life* should be credited to Browning, and in his letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* (April, 1870) gave the circumstances as follows:

"The volume was published in 1836. John Forster wrote the life of Eliot, the first in the volume,

[1] See second volume of *Lives of Eminent British Statesmen* in Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopædia*.

and began that of Strafford. He then fell ill ; and as he was anxious to produce the book in the time agreed on, Browning offered to finish *Strafford* for him, on his handing over all the material he had accumulated for it. Forster was greatly relieved by Browning's kindness. The poet set to work, completed Strafford's life on his own lines, in accordance with his own conception of Strafford's character, but generously said nothing about it till after Forster's death. Then he told a few of his friends—me among them—of how he had helped Forster. On my telling Professor Gardiner of this, I found that he knew it, and had been long convinced that the conception of Strafford in this Lardner *Life* was not John Forster's but was Robert Browning's. The other day Professor Gardiner urged me to make the fact of Browning's authorship public ; and I do so now, though I have frequently mentioned it to friends in private ; and at the Browning Society when a member has said : 'It is curious how closely Browning has followed his authority, Forster's *Life of Strafford,*' I have answered, 'Yes, because he wrote it himself.' We thus understand why, when Macready asked Browning on May 26, 1836, to write him a play, the poet suggested Strafford as its subject ; and why, the *Life* being finished in 1836, the play was printed and played in 1837."

This conviction of Browning's authorship of the *Life* resulted in its republication after his death with his name on the title-page. In *Poet Lore* for 1894

Mr. Kingsland questions the wisdom of such a step. The re-issue called forth a protest from Mrs. Forster, who asserted that her husband was too honourable a man to allow another's work to be put forward as his, and maintained that the work was almost wholly done by him.

To this conclusion the original preface to *Strafford* certainly points. "The portraits are, I think, faithful," Browning wrote, "and I am exceedingly fortunate in being able, in proof of this, to refer to the subtle and eloquent exposition of the characters of Eliot and Strafford, in the *Lives of Eminent British Statesmen,* now in the course of publication in *Lardner's Cyclopædia,* by a writer whom I am proud to call my friend." Mr. Kingsland is quite justified in thinking it inconceivable that Browning should have written in this way if he had been the sole or even the chief author of the *Life,* and in assuming that the "help" Browning gave Forster in the work consisted of supervision, correction of proof sheets, etc., in place of anything like original composition.

One thing only disturbs a final judgment based on that of Mr. Kingsland. In the recently published *Letters* we find Miss Barrett alluding to Browning's "Strafford" (the *Life*) and correcting herself with these significant words: "Mr. Forster's 'Strafford,' I beg his pardon for not attributing to him other men's works."

If we take this remark seriously we are again thrust back upon the theory that Browning used

Forster's notes for a framework and filled in the *Life* from his own impressions. His generosity in friendship, and his quite unusual modesty in the matter of claiming recognition, make it possible to assume that he sincerely underestimated his own part of the work and regarded the notes as the important and decisive element in the *Life*. This would account for the statement in the preface to the play.

An authoritative explanation, however, is the only possible solution to a puzzle somewhat more intricate than *Sordello*.

Professor Gardiner finds the play *Strafford* so inaccurate from the historical point of view that "the critic may dispense with the thankless task of pointing out discrepancies." The grasp of character, nevertheless, seems to him successful. "Every time I read the play," he says, "I feel more certain that Mr. Browning has seized the real Strafford, the man of critical brain, of rapid decision and tender heart, who strove for the good of his nation without sympathy for the generation in which he lived," and he adds the more surprising opinion that "Charles I., too, with his faults perhaps exaggerated, is the real Charles." A fragment of the real Charles, possibly, but like all the characters an incomplete conception. Decidedly Miss Barrett was right in thinking *Strafford* the poorest of the plays so far as literary merit goes. It shows that Browning at twenty-five had but a small proportion of the capacity to plan and to construct that marks the larger writers,—the architect-

onic faculty that set Marlowe in the front rank as a dramatist while he was still a boy in college.

There is also a want of sturdiness about the conception of the characters curiously opposed to the forcible aspect of Browning's later types. A contemporary reviewer justly complains of the sentimental manner in which even "the rough old Puritans" address each other: "A sort of affected, fondling tone which perfectly disconcerts us." The jerking style—what Mr. Masson calls "the abrupt gesture of impatient minds"—the same critic attributes to stage influence, declaring that tragic actors, "whose chief talent lies in giving an effect to isolated points and passages in which half the meaning is suppressed, are naturally fond of this mode of writing *par saccades,* as the French call it."

In support of his theory he produces parallel passages from Strafford's soliloquies and the conversation of Mr. Alfred Jingle—a somewhat startling pedigree for the style so long identified as a Browning idiosyncrasy.

It is interesting to note that in this criticism of *Strafford,* which occupies several pages of the *Edinburgh Review,* the reason given for devoting so much attention to the work is "the notable phenomenon of the favourable run of a simple historical play, on an English subject, by an author little known, and unassisted, as far as can be discovered, by any advantage of puffing or green-room connection."

This evidence that *Strafford* was certainly not an

"impossible" play for the stage is corroborated by the notices in the daily papers following the first and second nights of the performance. The *Times* pronounced it a dramatic effort "of no little promise"; the *Morning Herald* said that it was received with applause "but not so much as it deserved," and called it an acting tragedy "equally remarkable on our stage and in our literature"; the *Morning Post* devoted its attention mainly to the actors, and warned the author that if he were a candidate for immortality he must do much more before attaining it as a dramatic poet, but admitted that the tragedy was "most favourably received."

Browning's second and third plays, *The Return of the Druses* and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* followed in 1843, after an interval of six years. From *Sordello* Browning had turned "to the healthy natures of a grand epoch" by way of freshening "a jaded mind," as he confessed in the original preface to *Strafford*. In *The Return of the Druses* he joyfully retreats from the clear daylight of English history to old legends shadowy in the distance of time and space.

The Druses are a tribe found chiefly in the southern part of the mountainous region of the Lebanon; they are mysterious and uncommunicative respecting the religion of others and coveting no proselytes; they believe in the unity of God and in His incarnation in human form, holding that He was incarnated more than once on earth. They are noted for their hospitality to strangers, and one of the tenets of their faith

is: "Mutual help under all conditions." In the year 996 A.D. the reign of the Caliph Hakim Biamrillahi began, and for twenty-five years continued, a quarter-century of insane and monstrous tyranny. The Caliph believed himself "an incarnation of the Divine intelligence," and after his assassination his apostles preached the doctrine of his second coming. This is the point that fixes the plan of Browning's tragedy.

A colony of the Lebanon Druses is shown on a little island of the southern Sporades. The time is the fifteenth century. Djabal, the principal character of the drama, is an initiated Druse, son of the last emir, whose family has been massacred in the island, and who, escaping, has since spent his time in Europe. The Druse colony is under the rule of the Knights Hospitallers of Rhodes, whose prefect is a cruel and oppressive governor. Djabal returns, resolved to free his people, and is welcomed as the Messiah, the re-incarnated Hakim. He accepts the character and lets himself be worshipped, now deluding himself with his sense of a divine mission only to be accomplished under a guise of divinity, now struggling with a desire to appear in his own person and challenge fate honestly as a merely human leader of the fanatical enthusiasts whose disillusionment would doubtless mean their ruin and his own. The interest of the play is centred in the outcome of this conflict in Djabal's mind, and the situation is complicated by his love for Anael, a young Druse girl who has vowed to marry no one

but the man who shall deliver her countrymen and lead them back to Lebanon. Anael worships Djabal as a god, but finds it impossible to think of him as other than man. "Never a god to me!" she cries.

'T is the Man's hand,
Eye, voice! Oh, do you veil these to our people,
Or but to me? To them, I think, to them!
And brightness is their veil, shadow, my truth!

This consciousness of involuntary scepticism spurs her to more eager action, and as Djabal's plan of deliverance involves killing the prefect, she determines to take upon herself the murder, in order to raise herself to Djabal's level of devotion. Djabal discovers her immediately after she has stabbed the prefect, he having come on the same mission. Overcome, he confesses his imposture to her, and in her response the Browning creed of loyalty finds characteristic utterance. At first repelled, she bids him

Crouch!
Bow to the dust, thou basest of our kind!

then rallies, and urges him to open confession. "Come," she says, "to the Druses thou hast wronged!"

Confess,
Now that the end is gained—(I love thee now—)
That thou hast so deceived them—(perchance love thee
Better than ever). Come, receive their doom
Of infamy! Oh, best of all I love thee!
Shame with the man, no triumph with the god.
Be mine! Come!

But Djabal cannot bring his mind to this height of

renunciation; he refuses to confess publicly; and Anael in contempt of his cowardice betrays him. He accepts his fate in a long speech of pure introspection which so much moves Anael that she cries at last "Hakim!" and dies, leaving him to the people who are again convinced of his divinity and recommence their worship of him. He ends by killing himself.

Here is material for a play of much originality and power; and many of Mr. Browning's admirers look upon the result with satisfaction. Mr. Symons finds it "superbly passionate, rapid, vivid, intense, and picturesque"; in the Introduction to the Camberwell Edition it is declared to be "noticeable for the completeness with which it incorporates with the underlying motive revealed through personality, the more usual stage interests of telling character-progression, and of mere plot-surprising situation and effective spectacle," and Mr. Sharpe considers it the most picturesque of all the plays.

Undeniably it is picturesque, but if it were a picture it might fairly be criticised for showing the paint too plainly. It brings forcibly to mind Lowell's description of what he calls the "physically intense school" (citing *Aurora Leigh* as an example). Authors of this school forget, he says, "that convulsion is not energy, and that words, to hold fire, must first catch it from vehement heat of thought, while no artificial fervours of phrase can make the charm work backward to kindle the mind of writer or reader."

It is only necessary to make "the chronic Shake-

spearian comparison" and glance from *The Return of the Druses* to *Othello,* or *Hamlet,* or *Macbeth,* to realise that Djabal's character is not convincing because it is not well enough thought out. Nor does Anael give any definite and certain impression. Mr. Symons considers her cry "Hakim!" a "divine and adorable self-sacrifice of truth," assuming that she acknowledges Djabal's divinity against her own belief in order to save him from the wrath of the Druses. The editors of the Camberwell Edition dispute the point, contending that "it would be a direct contradiction to the whole tenor of the stopless course of this fiery, strong-souled Syrian maiden if her final word was a knowing lie."

The fact seems to be that Browning had not gained a perfect mastery over his own conception before he delivered it over to the reader, who is obliged to make good the imperfections of a too hasty method. The composition of the play in five days, an act to a day, is quoted as an example of Browning's marvellous rapidity of workmanship. It is an even better example of his reluctance to shape an elaborate work of art surely enough to save unwilling labour on the part of others.

The less elaborate and ambitious drama, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* suffers much less from an equally rapid composition, and is separable from all the other dramas by its deeper reading of human nature and by the unity of its general effect. In this tragic history of two misguided children we have a style so ardent

and restrained, a type of love so simple and so passionate, a form of construction so admirably proportioned, that it seems the one play to reach perfect fruition in Browning's varied group. For this reason its failure to answer the chief requirements of a psychological play is more conspicuous. The lines of the plot are simple. Mildred Tresham and Henry Mertoun have loved and sinned, and their attempt at late reparation is foiled by their own folly and awkwardness, and leads to the death of both,—Mertoun falling by the hand of Mildred's brother, and Mildred sinking under a weight of calamity too heavy for her strength.

Mr. Symons finds the force of the situation in what he calls "the inevitable nature of the final tragedy," which at first sight seems an unnecessary refinement of pure cruelty.

"A tragedy resulting from the mistakes of the wholly innocent," he says, "would jar on our sense of right, and could never produce a legitimate work of art. Even Œdipus suffers not merely because he is under the curse of a higher power, but because he is wilful and rushes upon his own fate. Timon suffers not because he was generous and good, but from the defects of his qualities. So in this play each of the characters calls down upon his own head the suffering which at first seems to be a mere caprice and confusion of chance."

If there had been more of this "inevitable" element in the tragedy it would have taken a higher

place among dramas of character. The flaw that cheapens it is the foolishness of the trespass, and the total lack of adequate temptation. There was nothing whatever to prevent the attainment of happiness by Mertoun and Mildred had they followed the path of virtue, in this case the broad and plain path. The play deals with sin and the punishment of sin, but there is no cognisance taken of the relations between cause and effect. The situation is not merely abnormal but inexplicable. The sentiment of pity is aroused, but it is pity mingled with condescension. There is no comprehending sympathy on the part of the observer; instinctive recognition of fate's decree in the miserable plight of the lovers. They have been wilful, certainly, and stupidly wilful at that. Romeo was a veritable Solon and Juliet an Athene by comparison. Thus we lose the deeper note of such psychological dramas as Sudermann, for example, is writing at the present day, where the appeal is made not merely to the emotions, but to the intelligence, which is able to realise the war between natural forces and imposed environment, and where a certain strenuous logic is constantly employed.

If we grant, however, the extremely unsatisfactory framework, we find the rest convincing and moving.

In Mildred's character Browning has escaped his usual pitfall of fitting too mature and complicated emotions to the delicate framework of an adolescent nature. In spite of the gravity of her acts Mildred's

immaturity is apparent in the crude fabric of her speech. She has no explanation, no excuses to offer when her brother charges her with guilt. She blunders fatally in trying to shield Mertoun, and perceives no way to mend her blunder. She stands like childhood incarnate reiterating her pathetic and forlorn complaint:

> I was so young, I loved him so, I had
> No mother, God forgot me, and I fell.

Not until the final scene of catastrophe does she lose her frightened simplicity and show a mental grasp too nearly adequate for her girlish intelligence.

Colombe's Birthday is less dramatic than *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* but it bears adequate testimony to Browning's increasing facility in realism. The young and gracious Duchess of Cleves has a charm of variety and brightness naturally wanting in Mildred's character overshadowed by doom and the consciousness of sin. When Miss Alma Murray interpreted the part, at the representation given by the Browning Society in 1885, the notices in the press were cordially favourable, and the general impression prevailed that competent acting brought to light unsuspected qualities of dramatic value. Browning's interest in the "boards" was waning, however. "That *Luria* shall be my last play," he wrote to Miss Barrett after she had expressed her wonder that he could bear to trust his noble works to be "ground to pieces between the teeth of vulgar actors and actresses."

His last play it practically was, if we overlook the fragmentary *In a Balcony,* and *A Soul's Tragedy,* which is inconceivable as an affair for the stage. In certain respects it is also his best play, although it lacks the singleness and directness of impression that marks *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* and has no character comparable in simplicity to Mildred.

Luria is a Moor "from Othello's country," and it is possible that Browning's conception of him was influenced by the thought of Othello. He is at all events the same "free and open nature that thinks men honest when they seem to be so," and one to whom "the flinty and steel couch of war" was his "thrice driven bed of down." Not a Moor of Venice but of Florence, he is a Mercenary fighting against Lucca, Pisa, and Siena. While he gains the victory his enemies of the seigniory are manufacturing evidence and weaving toils about him that he may be condemned for treason in the hour of triumph,—this from diplomatic distrust of an alien who may put power and popularity to dangerous uses. At the critical moment Luria discovers the treachery and the means of revenge. The Pisan general urges him to desert the Florence by which he has been betrayed, for the generalship of the enemy's forces which he offers to resign to him. His fidelity to his adopted city is not, however, to be transferred. His soliloquy upon the situation hints also at the danger to Florence if he should passively await the result of her action against him.

What then?
I ruin Florence, teach her friends mistrust,
Confirm her enemies in harsh belief,
And when she finds one day, as find she must,
The strange mistake and how my heart was hers,
Shall it console me, that my Florentines
Walk with a sadder step, in graver guise,
Who took me with such frankness, praised me so,
At the glad outset?

This point has been missed, apparently, by the most of Browning's commentators, yet the climax of the tragedy, Luria's suicide, is not adequately explained without it. It is the final consecration of character, and turns an act of almost cowardly despair into a sacrifice to the Very God of loyalty. Luria dies not merely from grief and disappointment, but because he cannot in any other way prevent the debasement of his city. If he lives she will add to her history the record of a deed of inconceivable ingratitude. If he dies, the danger is averted, and her enemies will never be able to accuse her.[1]

The gravity and dignity of *Luria* make up for many minor defects. It is hardly a stage play; the monologues are long and involved, the action is scanty and slow, and there is no strong centre of interest outside the decision of Luria's problem, but the sustained nobility and frankness of the Moor against the crafty background of Italian diplomacy is impressive, and the general grasp of the varied ele-

[1] No perspicacity is required to interpret this part of *Luria* since the publication of the letters to Miss Barrett, as Browning himself explains it fully. See vol. ii., page 424.

ments, national and individual, is much stronger than in any previous play of equal complexity.

It is interesting to learn from the letters to Miss Barrett that Browning meant at first to make the part of the quasi-heroine—Domizia—one of greater importance. Among his memoranda for the fifth act was this note "she loves," but by his own confession he "could not bring it." She does not love, and his Othello is obliged to hold the audience without the aid of a Desdemona.

When *Luria* was published in the last number of *Bells and Pomegranates* Browning felt that he was through for the time with dramatic writing in the technical sense. "Let all that I have done," he wrote to Miss Barrett, "be the prelude, and the real work begin."

CHAPTER IV.

ELIZABETH BARRETT.

UNTIL 1897, when Mr. Kenyon edited her letters with biographical editions, no accurate impression had been given of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Confusion existed concerning even the date and place of her birth, few details of her life were accessible, and an extravagant conception of a woman at once romantic and pedantic prevailed. This was due in part to the invalid life she had led, and in part to her great dislike of talking about her own affairs even with her intimate friends. Browning, in a letter to Dr. Furnivall (obviously replying to a request for biographical information), declares :

"The personality of my wife was so strong and peculiar that I had no curiosity to go beyond it, and concern myself with matters which she was evidently disinclined to communicate. I believe I discovered her birthday—the day, not the date—three weeks ago when engaged in some search after missing letters."

The circumstances of her marriage, the apparently

romantic secrecy of her flight from home to become Browning's wife, added colour to the sentimental and somewhat sensational accounts of her that got abroad; but now that Mr. Kenyon's book and the recently published love-letters are accessible, it is comparatively easy to piece together the plain story of a singularly interesting life.

Elizabeth Barrett Barrett was born at Coxhoe Hall, about five miles south of the city of Durham, on the 6th of March, 1806. Her father's name was originally Edward Barrett Moulton, the supplementary Barrett being added on the death of his maternal grandfather to whose Jamaica estates he fell heir. The full name—Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett—was so long that, "to make it portable," its owner "fell into the habit of doubling it up and packing it closely."

Her brothers sometimes reproached her for "sacrificing the governorship of an old town in Norfolk with a little honourable verdigris from the Herald's Office"; but she seems to have had little ancestor-worship in her composition. "As if I cared for the Retrospective Review," she says, and adds the curious statement:

"Nevertheless it is true that I would give ten towns in Norfolk (if I had them) to own some purer lineage than that of the blood of the slave. Cursed we are from generation to generation!—I seem to hear the Commination Service."

This reference to "the blood of the slave" in her

lineage, taken by itself, might prove misleading to the zealous biographer. Mr. Kenyon comments on the "curious coincidence" that she, like Robert Browning, was in part of West Indian descent, and the framing of her sentence suggests the dark-blood theory in her own case, advanced by Dr. Furnivall in connection with Browning. Considering the peculiar Barrett-Browning facility for tortuous constructions, however, it is reasonable to suppose that she means the "blood of the *slave,*" not in the veins but on the head of her ancestors, as her great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather owned slaves in Jamaica, where the latter had an income of fifty thousand a year and "wore patches at his knees and elbows upon principle."

In a letter to Mr. Ruskin she practically explains her confusing allusion :

"I belong to a family of West Indian slave-holders," she says, "and if I believed in curses I should be afraid. I can at least thank God that I am not an American. How you look serenely at slavery I cannot understand, and I distrust your power to explain."

Mr. Barrett—Elizabeth's father—had eleven children, three daughters and eight sons, and held toward them much the position of the Father of Russia toward his faithful people. All, save Elizabeth, were financially dependent upon him, and all, including Elizabeth, were absolutely subject to his remarkable will.

That she commonly spoke of him as another daughter might speak of a parent not merely beloved but extremely indulgent, is strong evidence of her capacity for generously bestowing affection, and evidence also, it is fair to assume, of the presence of some endearing traits in his character not in the least apparent to the ordinary observer.

Her early letters after the death of her mother refer to him with tender admiration, and in the later letters we now and again come upon unimportant but not wholly insignificant details that point towards a certain degree of kindness and affection on his part: an account of an episode connected with the departure of the family from Sidmouth when one of his little sons unhesitatingly preferred remaining with him to joining the other children; reference to regular evening visits to his daughter's room; mention of his bringing flowers to her from the city; and various proofs of his interest in her work shown as early as the first publication of *The Battle of Marathon* (written when she was eleven or twelve years old), fifty copies of which he had printed, and which was dedicated "to the Father whose never-failing kindness, whose unwearied affection, I never can repay."

When most wounded by the failure of that much appreciated "kindness," his daughter insisted upon ascribing the fault to the "system" by which he ordered his relation to his family and not to coldness of heart. Certainly the system was sufficiently

peculiar, involving an assumption on his part of the divine right to rule ; and the results of its logical application were disastrous to anything like peace of mind for his children. It seems to have been an *idée fixe* with him that none of his children should marry, and this repugnance amounted to mania. This accounts for the otherwise inexplicable secrecy in which Miss Barrett's engagement to Browning was kept during the entire term of its duration. In a letter justifying her caution she gives a remarkable description of the scene that took place when one of her sisters asked her father's consent to her own engagement, yielding at once when that consent was refused, but not unnaturally showing some traces of feeling. "I hear how her knees were made to ring upon the floor, now!" Miss Barrett wrote, adding that the girl was carried out of the room in strong hysterics, while she herself, though not at the time in ill-health, fell down in a fainting-fit from terrified sympathy. It is not surprising that under these circumstances anything like confidence between father and daughter on this one subject should have been judged impossible.

What is surprising is the fact that the family managed to hold together long after they were of an age to disperse and seek their own satisfactions. Putting aside the financial obstacle which cannot be considered absolute in the case of grown men and women, it must be inferred that in spite of Mr. Barrett's violent temper and forms of eccentricity approaching

insanity, he possessed enough generosity of disposition to make his home more than endurable when his will was permitted to be the pivot upon which family arrangements turned. That he possessed a single trace of the kind of unselfishness that involves the sacrifice of personal preferences, it is difficult to assume in the face of the facts given in Miss Barrett's letters. She herself, for example, once gathered her courage, at a time when she was "in high favour," to ask that her cousin, Mr. Kenyon, should be invited to dinner. The request was refused.

Friends who looked on from without felt a high degree of indignation at the "tyranny" of the household management, and nothing is more indicative of Browning's true gentleness of disposition and consideration for others than his self-restraint on a subject that must sorely have tried his strength in that direction. Only once in the course of his correspondence with Miss Barrett does he give expression to his deep resentment, and it is curious to note how on that occasion his tortured phraseology gives way to directness and point in vigorous anathema.

Of Mrs. Barrett little is known. On a window that was once a part of Kelloe Church was found an inscription scratched with a diamond :

Charming Mrs. Barrett,
Coxhoe beauty,

which probably refers to her. Her daughter describes her as "one of those women who never can resist, but in submitting and bowing on themselves,

make a mark, a plait, within—a sign of suffering," and declares that her only fault lay in being "too womanly." Apparently all her children inherited something of her faculty for submission, Elizabeth, the weakest in body, being the first who was successful in opposition to the one authority.

Elizabeth Barrett's childhood as well as the larger part of her youth was spent at her father's estate of Hope End in Herefordshire, a few miles from Malvern. In a letter to Mr. Horne she speaks of it as a retirement scarcely broken except by books and her own thoughts.

"There I had my fits of Pope and Byron and Coleridge," she says, "and read Greek as hard under the trees as some of your Oxonians in the Bodleian; gathered visions from Plato and the dramatists, and ate and drank Greek and made my head ache with it."

The poem called *The Lost Bower* is a pre-Raphaelite picture of the Malvern region, the scene of Piers Plowman's visions:

Dimpled close with hill and valley,
Dappled very close with shade;
Summer-snow of apple-blossoms running up from glade to glade.

Like Browning and Tennyson she chose a wood for her favourite walk, pushing through thickets where the sheep had tried to run and from which, with "silly thorn-pricked noses," they had "bleated back into the sun." Out in the sunshine and country air she seems to have played with her classic heroes much as children of more ordinary type play with

their dolls. The thought of Œdipus was mingled with the memory of the Lost Bower, and valorous Hector served her fancy as a garden-bed :

> Call him Hector, son of Priam,
> Such his title and degree.
> With my rake I smoothed his brow,
> Both his cheeks I weeded through,
> But a rhymer such as I am,
> Scarce can sing his dignity.

Mérimée advised his "*Inconnue*" to learn Greek that she might enjoy the tragedians ; but Browning's *bien-connue* marched abreast with him. When he was playing at Homer's story with his cat and pony, she was planting Hector's sword of lilies and "brazen helm of daffodillies"; when he was "measuring out heroic couplets with his hand round the dining-table in Camberwell," she was writing an "epic" and burning sacrifices to Minerva who was her favourite goddess "because she cared for Athens."

Her knowledge of Greek was gained through sharing her brother Edward's work under his tutor, and was fostered by her intercourse with the blind scholar, Hugh Boyd, who was not, however, her teacher in the usual sense of the word, but a valued critic of her verse who consistently found fault with her metres and exhorted her to follow Pope. Her letters to this friend, whose inclination was to chasten whom he loved, are written in a charming spirit of deference and confidence, and to Browning she describes him as "one of the men born shepherds," talking "such pure childishness sometimes in such

pure Attic." She thought that he cared for her more perhaps than for anyone else; but if he should hear of her death would merely sleep a little sounder the next night, it being his tendency to go to sleep when he felt sorry about anything. Up to the time of her acquaintance with Browning Mr. Boyd was obviously her most inspiriting correspondent, and although none of his letters have been published, their truth-telling quality and the entire absence of anything like incense-burning may easily be gathered from her replies.

When she was twenty-seven years old she gave an injudicious proof of her interest in Greek subjects by "undoing," to use her own phrase, the *Prometheus* of Æschylus into English. The book was published anonymously, but five years later, when *The Seraphim and Other Poems* came out, she acknowledged her authorship of the translation. In Nicoll and Wise's *Literary Anecdotes*, the statement of this fact is supplemented by the remark: "How soon 'wrath got hold upon her soul' for the sake of Æschylus and what he suffered at her hands—bibliography does not reveal. Certainly we hear no more of the translation in her collection of 1844, and between the issue of that very treasurable book of 1838, *The Seraphim* . . . , and the still more treasurable *Poems* of 1844, she had probably repented, in sackcloth and ashes, of the scant justice done to Æschylus in her early womanhood."

That this picture of repentance is not overdrawn

appears from her letters of 1845, in which she declares that the sin of her translation is her nightmare and daymare too, and the blot on her 'scutcheon. It was "written in twelve days, and ought to have been thrown into the fire afterwards—the only means of giving it a little warmth." Later she published another and altogether different translation.

In spite of her precocity as a child, and the early inclination of her mind toward poetry, her gift developed slowly. Her letters written between twenty and thirty are childishly expressed and show little originality of thought. An affectionate, gentle nature fed chiefly upon books is all that they reveal; and her early work seems hardly more characteristic. Of the graceful touch and clever merry expressions that abound in her later correspondence, and of the positive and individual opinions for which her poetry presently became the vehicle, we see nothing until she is in her full maturity.

The ill-health from which she suffered commenced as early as her fifteenth year when in trying to saddle her pony she fell and received an injury to the spine. Apparently, however, the illness caused by this was but temporary, her permanent invalidism resulting from the breaking of a blood-vessel in 1838.

On account of her serious condition from this cause she was sent to Torquay in the company of her eldest brother, Edward, with whom she had studied and who was more in sympathy with her tastes and temperament than any other member of the family. At

Torquay he was drowned, and the shock combined with her grief for his loss to prostrate her utterly.

Not until 1841 did she recover enough strength of body and mind to return to London where the family were then living, and to the work into which she henceforth threw herself as a refuge from overwhelming recollections.

She was already known to a considerable public through the duodecimo volume entitled *The Seraphim and Other Poems* which made its appearance at the end of May, 1838,—one year later than the performance of *Strafford* at the Covent Garden Theatre.

The criticisms in the *Athenæum,* the *Examiner,* the *Atlas,* and (after two years) the *Quarterly Review* paid her the tribute of careful consideration of her defects, and cordial acknowledgment of her finer qualities. Her ambitious attempts upon subjects demanding exceptional power and restraint, and her numerous mannerisms, marked her for serious fault-finding; but her sincerity and genuine imagination made their appeal.

In 1844 the two volumes of *Poems* appeared. These contained, besides the minor poems, *A Drama of Exile,* and *Lady Geraldine's Courtship;* the former a Miltonic subject with Adam and Eve for hero and heroine, done in blank verse; the latter, a "ballad poem" finished in haste (140 lines in one day) to piece out the first volume, which was discovered at the last moment to be disproportionately short. This "masterpiece of rhetorical sentimentality," to adopt

Mr. Kenyon's designation of it, was altogether the favourite with the critics and was selected for special praise by Carlyle and Miss Martineau. The two volumes "won her the position which for the rest of her life she held in popular estimation among the leaders of English poetry," and were reviewed at length in the various papers and magazines. "Only two criticisms rankled," Mr. Kenyon says: "the one that she was a follower of Tennyson, the other that her rhymes were slovenly and careless." The first criticism is not a very intelligent one, but the second is more plausible. The author earnestly repudiated, however, the charge of carelessness, and declared that *conviction* was the source of her curious rhyming. "I have a theory about double rhymes," she writes to Mr. Boyd, "for which I shall be attacked by the critics, but which I could justify perhaps on high authority, or at least analogy. In fact these volumes of mine have more double rhymes than any two books of English poems that ever to my knowledge were printed; I mean of English poems *not comic*. Now of double rhymes in use, which are perfect rhymes, you are aware how few there are, and yet you are also aware of what an admirable effect in making a rhythm various and vigorous, double rhyming is in English poetry. Therefore, I have used a certain licence; and after much thoughtful study of the Elizabethan writers have ventured it with the public. And do *you* tell me, *you* who object to the use of a different *vowel* in a double rhyme, *why* you

rhyme (as everybody does without blame from anybody) 'given' to 'heaven,' when you object to my rhyming 'remember' and 'chamber'? The analogy surely is all on my side, and I *believe* that the spirit of the English language is also."

This spirited defence is interesting not because it justifies the result of the experiment, but as an explanation of it. Mr. Kenyon attributes her fondness for dissyllabic rhymes partly to her acquaintance with Italian literature, and her use of assonances to the paucity of pure rhymes of the dissyllabic kind in the English language.

"Now it may be," he says, "that a writer with a very sensitive ear would not have attempted such an experiment, and it is a fact that public taste has not approved it, but the experiment itself is as legitimate as, say, the metrical experiments in hexameters and hendecasyllabics of Longfellow or Tennyson, and whether approved or not it should be criticised as an experiment, not as mere carelessness."

The critic who reviewed her poems in *Blackwood* hit upon the fatal weakness of these experiments in his discussion of her habit of employing certain adjectives in a substantive sense, as when she writes: "Leaning from *my human,*" or "Chanting down the *Golden.*"

"It is true," he says, "that this practice may be defended to a certain extent by the example and authority of Milton. But Miss Barrett is mistaken if she supposes that her frequent and prominent use of

such a form of speech can be justified by the rare and unobtrusive instances of it which are to be found in the *Paradise Lost*. To use an anomalous expression two or three times in a poem consisting of many thousand lines, is a very different thing from bringing the same anomaly conspicuously forward, and employing it as a common and favourite mode of speech in a number of small poems. In the former case, it will be found that the expression is vindicated by the context, and by the circumstances under which it is employed ; in the latter case, it becomes a nuisance which cannot be too rigorously put down."

The same principle applies to her dissyllabic rhymes, and her indulgence in compound words. Intellectual fastidiousness would certainly have guarded her from such immoderate use of them as constituted mannerism.

In his concluding paragraph the *Blackwood's* reviewer counselled her to write "simply from her own heart, and without thinking of the compositions of any other author" except so far as she is sure "that they embody great thoughts in pure and appropriate language, and in forms of construction which will endure the most rigid scrutiny of common sense and unperverted taste."

When, later, she met this demand, as in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese,* her poetry touched its high-water mark and became worthy of inclusion in the art that is made out of life, the only art that has power to move the heart or to exalt the mind.

The fact that the crudities of her style, the infelicities with which she continually cheapened her truly exceptional gift of unpremeditated song, did not in any case entirely obscure the sincerity and purity of her inspiration, is suggested by the view taken of her in French criticism. M. Taine finds in her work the revelation of a "generous, heroic, impassioned soul," altogether modern "by its education, by its pride, by its daring, by the constant agitation of its tense susceptibilities."

M. Joseph Texte is quick to observe in her *Aurora Leigh* an impression of modernity so persisting that after forty years the poem still seems as though written yesterday, and adds the amazing statement that "among foreign poets there is not one who is nearer to us [Frenchmen] and to our interests than this Elizabeth Browning."

The most important experience in connection with the publication of the 1844 volumes was the letter they elicited from Browning. Returning from a trip to Italy a few months after their appearance, he expressed his admiration of the poems to his friend, John Kenyon, who urged him to write to the author. In January, 1845, he therefore sent her the appreciative letter which threw her "into ecstasies" as coming from the "Browning of Paracelsus, king of the mystics." In it he speaks of the "fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos, and true new brave thought," and declares with startling candour, "I do, as I say, love these books

with all my heart—and I love you too," a declaration that opens abruptly a correspondence predestined to lead to the marriage of the two poets. There was between them certainly the "nameless something that puts two souls in unison," the sympathetic understanding that made them, in spite of all external differences, feel and think alike. Their letters to each other are very different from other love-letters that have been made public, and the fact of their having been published is not taken so frankly as a matter of course in the English world as undoubtedly it would have been in France. The two thick volumes containing them are marked by one break only, where a letter that must have been a model of fervour and awkwardness was burned. The rest, mounting well up into the hundreds, have been printed without omission or change even in the matter of punctuation.

In his prefatory note Mr. Robert Barrett Browning explains that his father destroyed all his correspondence except these letters, of which he said: "There they are, do with them as you please when I am dead and gone!" The two alternatives seemed to be to publish them or to destroy them, and Mr. Browning chose the former.

If we could get rid of the sense of contemporaneousness, if we could feel ourselves removed by one or more centuries or even by the difference of an alien country from these two supremely English and supremely modern lovers, it would be easier to con-

cede that the sincerity and nobility of the emotions expressed and the singularly characteristic form of the expression justify the letting in of the world upon this deep privacy. As it is, the sensitive reader can hardly avoid a consciousness of eavesdropping, as intimate confidences, made under the stress of the most absorbing and exclusive emotion that we know anything about, constantly unfold themselves.

Miss Barrett, herself, held opinions on the subject of published letters that should make the path of the literary executor comparatively plain. Considering them "the most vital part of biography," she thought it wrong and selfish not to be ready to say that "if the secrets of our daily lives and inner souls may instruct other surviving souls, let them be open to men hereafter even as they are to God now."

"Dust to dust, and soul secrets to humanity," she says; "there are natural heirs to all these things."

The letters, in spite of their freedom and intensity, cannot be called unconscious revelations. Both Browning and Miss Barrett were intensely self-conscious, and their letters would not have been natural had they not contained an immense amount of intelligent analysis of thoughts and feelings which the simpler world might be satisfied to accept as inexplicable. One is tempted at times to think of the "reasoning romance" to which poor Keats so much objected in the letters of Rousseau. His own "little correspondence" with Fanny Brawne, if contrasted with that of the Brownings, is a most illuminating

example of the extreme possibilities of difference between the love-letters of poets; and a superficial similarity of circumstance—the invalid life for the one lover, exuberant vitality for the other, the need of books for one and the need of men and women for the other—only marks more clearly the true disparity in the two cases.

Between Browning and Miss Barrett an essential likeness of mind and character existed, a likeness which has been ignored by those who find it remarkable that Browning, the essence of sturdy force and energy, should choose for his mate an invalid older in years than himself, and a recluse. Browning was a man of the world, though not perhaps of the gayest world, and his wife was taken from a room in London whose windows did not look upon the street, and in which the solitude and silence were so complete that sounds such as her little dog's breathing and the striking of ivy leaves on the window-pane were notable.

But an integral sincerity, an affectionateness at once deep and demonstrative, a subjective attitude toward life, an untiring loquacity in discussion, were traits common to both and thoroughly developed at the time when they began assiduously to compare their tastes, opinions, impressions, and beliefs.

The distinguishing feature of their correspondence is the steady glow of the feeling into which their friendship soon ripened. Both were ready with a quick response of sympathy to any form of kindness,

and this responsiveness frequently found utterance in assurances so fervent as to be profoundly misleading; since the average English mind is accustomed to distrust prolixity in emotion.

But the root of their almost oppressive flower of sentiment was sturdily planted, and there is no sign of fluctuation or capriciousness in their letters, no petty quarrel or evidence of ill-temper. The level is so high that the ordinary workaday mood needs to be keyed up to meet it. The natural extravagance of love is tempered and dignified by an extraordinary unselfishness and purity. Such intervals of doubt and jealousy as those by which the morbid, the literally dying heart of Keats was tortured, are totally unknown to these healthier-minded lovers.

With Miss Barrett, in particular, this even mood is striking since one of the symptoms of her ill-health was a nervousness so intense as to demand opium for its remedy; and on one occasion she writes of morphine as the most important in her personal expenses. Browning, also, despite his appearance of lusty health, suffered constantly from headache and other forms of nervous excitability.

Their respect for themselves and for each other forbade, however, any yielding of their affection to momentary irritations. It would not be difficult to emphasise the impression of monotony given by constant assurances of gratitude and humility. Each is continually looking up to the other, and acknow-

ledging "kindness" and "considerateness" and phenomenal indulgence and generosity. Fortunately a real cause for such gentleness existed in both natures. They were not better in their protestations than in their behaviour, they were never more moralising than moral, and the idea of sacrificing others to their own happiness was deeply repugnant to them.

The ballast to their exaltation of soul is found in a strong common sense underlying the "psychological passion" characteristic of them both; and Miss Barrett was certainly the clearer-headed of the two. Throughout the courtship she had been slow to admit the wisdom of Browning's choice. She was deeply touched by his swift "infatuation" but she was never flattered by it; her genuine humility instructing her to believe that the feeling on his part was an unselfish impulse that would subside and leave them friends but very far from lovers, and this result she desired, or honestly attempted to desire, as happiest and most advantageous for him. She saw in herself the effects of long illness and an almost conventual existence; she could put into his life, she thought and said, "nothing but anxiety and more sadness than he was born to," and could give him only what would be ungenerous to give.

When finally, realising from the persistent testimony of a passion in which ardour was mingled with chivalric consideration that she had become permanently necessary to his life, she yielded, the probation if not long had been thorough.

Four months after his first letter to her, Browning succeeded in getting her consent to penetrate her seclusion and talk with her face to face in that silent room to which only her dog Flush seems to have had free access. His concern at the tumult made by his loud voice in the place toned down to her fragile presence, calls up a picture at once touching and amusing of that first agitating meeting, followed on his part by the letter that was destroyed, bringing them perilously near such a condition of misunderstanding as apparently never again threatened them.

Then followed another four months during which the letters became a familiar habit, and the visits were permitted to occur thrice a fortnight, greater frequency than this being deemed unadvisable as likely to arouse Mr. Barrett's antagonism. They struggled valiantly to maintain the Platonic ideal, drawing steadily away from it as their knowledge of each other increased. Miss Barrett consistently refused to consent to an engagement, wishing not to burden Browning with the responsibilities of her invalid life, and dreading also her father's certain opposition.

In the autumn of 1845, however, a crisis occurred to change her judgment. Her doctors advised her to go abroad for the winter, considering it dangerous for her to stay, and believing that a permanent improvement in health would follow her escape from the English climate during the cold weather.

Strangely enough her father's perversity was

roused by this advice, and he declined to sanction such a step, declaring that if she went it must be without his approval.

It is impossible to conjecture what impulse prompted him, but he was immovable in his wholly unjustifiable attitude. His daughter felt that this indifference to her health indicated a lack of the affection she had supposed he felt for her, especially as he assumed the air of a man with a grievance, cutting his daily visits to her room down to a period of a few moments, and maintaining an injured aspect.

Deeply wounded and quite assured of the unchanging quality of Browning's attachment, she decided no longer to let her scruples stand in the way of what was obviously his happiness and certainly her own. She agreed that if she could hold her own in health during the English winter she would marry him at the end of the following summer and leave England for Italy with him before the cold weather.

The practical obstacle was still Mr. Barrett's disposition. To ask his consent would be not merely useless but disastrous, as in addition to refusing the consent he undoubtedly would make a scene appalling to an invalid in Miss Barrett's state of nervous and physical weakness. The only alternative was a clandestine marriage, and this took place on the twelfth of September, 1846. No one was taken into confidence, as Miss Barrett felt that it would be "infamous" to let anyone suffer her father's displeasure

as a direct consequence of her act. Her two sisters knew of the engagement, but not of the final event. Her brothers knew nothing beyond their conjectures.

After all arrangements were completed,—with tremendous energy and confusion on the part of Browning, who would move mountains but failed at the crucial moment to make a clear statement of time-tables,—Miss Barrett slipped quietly out of the house, accompanied only by her maid Wilson, and was married to Robert Browning at Marylebone Church at a quarter before eleven.

This meeting was their ninety-first, a fact recorded by Browning on the last letter he received from Elizabeth Barrett before she took his name.

From the church Mrs. Browning drove to Mr. Boyd's house, where she met her sisters, who were still ignorant of what had happened. She then returned to her home for the week's interval before the family left town. During that week Browning refrained from seeing her, not wishing to ask for her by her maiden name and not daring to do otherwise.

On September 19th she again left home with Wilson and the dog Flush, and joining her husband set out for Paris, never to return to her father's home. She had predicted that her father would cast her off and be angry "to the utmost," but had ventured to hope that in time he would forgive her. In this she was over-sanguine. He read none of her letters even when they came to him with black borders, and he had no way of knowing that she was

not widowed. When he heard of the birth of her child he refused to see either child or mother, and "expressed no sympathy or anxiety." Until he died this attitude was maintained without a trace of relenting on his part, and without a single recorded word of anger or resentment upon hers.[1]

[1] After the publication of the Barrett-Browning letters the two following communications were sent to the press by Mrs. Browning's brother, Mr. C. J. Moulton-Barrett :

Letter to the *London Standard* from Mrs. Browning's brother, dated Jacksontown, Jamaica, March 30, 1899.

"In spite of earnest protests, Mr. Browning, with a want of delicacy hardly conceivable, has published the letters of his father and mother previous to their marriage. The careless indifference of Mr. Robert Browning, 'There they are, do with them as you please when I am dead and gone,' was no excuse for the sacrilege. His mother would have been horrified. She loved her father.

"The notices of the book have generally been so cruelly unjust to his memory, I consider it my duty, as his eldest surviving son, to relate the facts. My father acted as his own merchant for his Jamaica estates, and on that account went daily to the city. He never met Mr. Browning. He was aware of his visits, and he regarded them like the visits of Miss Mitford and Mr. Kenyon, as affording my sister pleasure. He was also aware of Mr. Browning's intimacy with Mr. Kenyon, who was a friend and a distant relative.

"My sister had been an invalid for years. By the directions of Dr. Chambers her room was kept at a certain temperature, and she never left it.

"Under these circumstances my father lost his daughter. He had loved her from her childhood. He never recovered from it. I venture to say few fathers would take the hand of a man who had so acted. And I would add, few sons, either for gain or love of notoriety, would make public the confidential letters of their mother. I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

"C. J. Moulton-Barrett."

To *The New York Times Saturday Review :*

"To judge by *The New York Times Saturday Review* and other newspapers, the general impression appears to be that I am the only member of the family objecting to the publication of the Browning letters. My brothers strongly objected, and earnestly entreated Mr. Browning in the event of his obstinacy to expunge the passages likely to give pain. That he paid no attention to their request is evident from the scurrilous attacks on my father. Mr. Browning's intention appears to have been to clear his father's extraordinary conduct at the expense of mine.

"Clever men are not exempt from the rules that govern society. Far from taking the usual and correct course, Mr. Robert Browning, although engaged to his daughter, studiously avoided not only her father, but her six brothers, not one of them having the slightest suspicion of the engagement. I am in my eighty-fifth

Such are the facts underlying the story of Browning's marriage to Elizabeth Barrett. Seen by their

year, and cannot be far from my grave, and I solemnly affirm that the idea of an engagement never once occurred to me.

"From the confinement to her bed for many years, owing to an injury to her spine, to the long illness in London, my father had ever been most tender and affectionate to her. Seldom without anxiety on her account, he has been described as a tyrant. The blow came when he was over seventy. How many of us at that age would calmly turn the other cheek to the smiter, who, by a shameful deception, had forfeited all claim on our generosity? The statement of a nameless 'cousin' that my father objected to the sacrament of marriage, however contemptible, may yet be greedily swallowed. Like many others, he regarded marriage seriously, and he refused his consent when he conceived the marriage would prove unhappy. Parents constantly exercise the right, which, indeed, is their duty, without being tyrants and bitter opponents to marriage.

"As regards myself, it matters little. The extract relating to *The Examiner* proves indeed Mr. Browning's possession of the 'extreme delicacy' his friends claim for him. A private letter, no matter what the subject or the means by which he obtains it, he publishes without the shadow of an excuse. A little vexation, however, not intended as prey to Mr. Browning, and the sneers of strangers will not change in the slightest degree the conviction that my sister loved me with all my imperfections. My sole object has been the defence of my father, one who reverenced religion, and who throughout a long life never committed one act unworthy of a man of honour. It was my imperative duty, and it has given me inexpressible pain. On the present Mr. Browning rests the scandal, and I hope it pleases him.

"I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

"C. J. Moulton-Barrett.

"Jacksontown, Island of Jamaica,
June 27, 1899."

It is quite possible that these letters represent the view taken by Mr. Barrett himself of his attitude toward his daughter, and for that reason they are interesting. That they constitute a valid defence of his action is not, however, to be admitted. Miss Barrett abhorred the secrecy it was necessary to maintain, and her belief that secrecy *was* necessary was founded on her knowledge of her sister's experience. The contention that anxiety for her health was the ruling motive in her father's mind is untenable in the face of his refusal to consent to the Italian trip, which her doctors considered of vital importance. The one point in which Mr. Moulton-Barrett's explanation seems justified by the facts lies in the sentence: "Like many others, he regarded marriage seriously, and he refused to consent when he conceived the marriage would prove unhappy."

A jesting allusion in one of Mrs. Browning's letters indicates that her brothers (and probably her father) strongly objected to marriage on a small income under any circumstances. Browning's income was not only small but extremely precarious, and even with the addition of his wife's property their financial estate could not be con-

light the clandestine element, which before had seemed unnecessarily romantic and undignified, becomes comprehensible and inevitable.

sidered remarkably prosperous until they received Mr. Kenyon's legacy, although he had made them an allowance of two hundred pounds a year after their marriage.

While this might explain Mr. Barrett's aversion to marriage in particular cases, it certainly does not excuse his brutality in the exercise of such authority as he deemed within his right, nor does it justify his continued anger against a daughter whose secret marriage (at the age of forty) was, in his own words, the only offence she had ever committed. Apparently any injury to his self-love was the unforgivable sin.

CHAPTER V.

MARRIED LIFE.

"I HAVE here," wrote Mrs. Jameson, from Paris, just after the Brownings arrived there on their wedding journey, "a poet and a poetess—two celebrities who have run away and married under circumstances peculiarly interesting, and such as to render imprudence the height of prudence. Both excellent; but God help them! for I know not how the two poet heads and poet hearts will get on through this prosaic world."

As a matter of fact they got on remarkably well from the purely prosaic standpoint. In their letters they had discussed their financial situation with delightful candour and good-feeling. Mrs. Browning had several hundred pounds income from property which she held in her own right, and Browning's mind was freed from anxiety on her account should his own precarious mode of money-getting fail him at times.

His pride took the self-respecting form of preferring strict economy, even abstemiousness, to debt

or obligation. "After we marry, nobody must hear of us," he had said before his marriage; and there is every indication that nobody did hear of them in the rôle of borrowers. Early in their career Mrs. Browning reports that they spent "scarcely three hundred pounds a year," and had "every luxury." Neither of them was a victim of the so-called artistic temperament, and Mrs. Jameson presently confessed that their housekeeping was an example to her.

From Paris they went to Pisa, living, for six months, in a suite of four rooms, in the great Collegio built by Vasari, near the Duomo and Leaning Tower. The daily intercourse of common life brought no disillusionment. Mrs. Browning's health steadily improved under the stimulus of happiness, and in her letters the pictures drawn of their pleasant home in the midst of Pisa's beauty and repose, where they lived simply and worked worthily, appeal to the most restricted imagination.

It was during this period that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were shown to Browning, and the little account by Mr. Gosse explains the way in which the two poets preserved their intellectual independence.

"Their custom was, Mr. Browning said, to write alone, and not to show each other what they had written. This was a rule which he sometimes broke through, but she never. He had the habit of working in a downstairs room where their meals were spread, while Mrs. Browning studied in a room on

the floor above. One day early in 1847, their breakfast being over, Mrs. Browning went up-stairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of someone behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room."

Browning "dared not" reserve to himself, he said, "the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's." Through Miss Mitford's agency they were printed under the title, *Sonnets by E. B. B.*, with the imprint "Reading, 1847," and marked "Not for publication." In the 1850 edition of Mrs. Browning's poems they appeared as *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a title suggested by Browning "for the sake of its half-allusion to her other poem, 'Caterina to Camoens,' which was one of his chief favourites among her works."

From Pisa the Brownings went to Florence where they finally established themselves in the Palazzo Guidi, the "Casa Guidi" of the poem, and ever since associated with their memory.

Mrs. Browning describes their rooms as a "noble suite," the favourite rooms of Count Guidi who traced connection through marriage with Dante's Ugolino, and promises her friends "excellent coffee"

and the sight of vines and myrtles and orange trees on the terrace. All this was obtained for five-and-twenty guineas a year, and the furnishing of "rococo chairs, spring sofas, carved bookcases, satin from cardinals' beds, and the rest" was done gradually and to suit their taste from the proceeds of their books during the preceding two winters. To the traveller with no special associations in mind, the Casa Guidi, which now belongs to Mr. Robert Barret Browning, wears a more or less dingy and gloomy aspect not very suggestive of the living place gently astir with the quiet, delightful interests of two people who certainly had caught the secret of getting from life the best it contains.

A writer in the *Atlantic* for 1861 gives the contemporaneous impression. Those who knew the place as it was can never forget "the square anteroom, with its great picture and pianoforte, at which the boy Browning passed many an hour,—the little dining-room covered with tapestry, where hung medallions of Tennyson, Carlyle, and Robert Browning,—the long room filled with plaster casts and studies, which was Mr. Browning's retreat,—and, dearest of all, the large drawing-room where *she* always sat. It opens upon a balcony filled with plants, and looks out upon the old iron-grey church of Santa Felice. There was something about this room that seemed to make it a proper and especial haunt for poets. The dark shadows and subdued light gave it a dreamy look, which was enhanced by

the tapestry-covered walls, and the old pictures of saints that looked out sadly from their carved frames of black wood. Large bookcases, constructed of specimens of Florentine carving selected by Mr. Browning, were brimming over with wise-looking books. Tables were covered with more gaily bound volumes, the gifts of brother authors.

"Dante's grave profile, a cast of Keats' face and brow taken after death, a pen and ink sketch of Tennyson, the genial face of the boy Browning, all attracted the eye in turn, and gave rise to a thousand musings. A quaint mirror, easy chairs and sofas, and a hundred nothings that always add an indescribable charm, were all massed in this room. But the glory of all, and that which sanctified all, was seated in a low arm-chair near the door. A small table, strewn with writing materials, books, and newspapers, was always by her side."

Among these surroundings Browning wrote the fifty poems published in 1855 under the title of *Men and Women*, a marvellous collection of verse, in which are found in swift alternation delicacy and passion, quietude and storm, grim honesty and exquisite fancy, the ripe and ruddy fruit of his observation and practice suddenly taking its perfect colour in the warmth of his new interests. Here also Mrs. Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh* and the long series of poems inspired by her constantly deepening concern for the national affairs of Italy.

In 1849 a son was born and seems in nowise to

have overtaxed the ability of the poets to adapt themselves without difficulty to the conditions of married life. These conditions in their case were far from complex—fifteen months after her marriage Mrs. Browning wrote in a letter to Mrs. Jameson: "We live just as we did when you knew us, just as shut-up a life. Robert never goes anywhere except to take a walk with Flush, which is n't my fault, as you may imagine: he has not been out one evening of the fifteen months; but what with music and books and writing and talking, we scarcely know how the days go, it 's such a gallop on the grass."

She, at least, recognised with amusing naïveté, and the common sense that lay beneath all her ardours of expression, how severely the absolute seclusion and "perpetual *tête-à-tête*" tested the genuine quality of their affection, and showed a childlike triumph and delight in avowing it; and a joy that was far from childlike in realising how futile were the hesitations she had felt in making what seemed to her the ungracious gift of a life much worn with sickness and sorrow.

It was a long time before her astonishment at the possibilities of the new life subsided; and her letters contain reiterated allusions making a species of calendar on which the lengthening term of her satisfaction is recorded.

"Robert and I are deep in the fourth month of wedlock, and there has not been a shadow between

us, nor a *word* (and I have observed that all married people confess to *words*)."

"A year (nearly) is saved from the darkness . . . so well I am, and so happy after a year's trial of the stuff of marriage."

"I must say to you,[1] who saw the beginning with us, that this end of fifteen months is just fifteen times better and brighter . . . the only differences which have touched me, bring more and more happiness."

"After twenty months of marriage we are happier than ever . . . I may say *we*."

Thus she keeps the account to the August of 1851 when she writes to her old friend, Mrs. Martin:

"So far from regretting my marriage, it has made the happiness and honour of my life, and every unkindness received from my own house makes me press nearer to the tenderest and noblest of human hearts *proved* by the uninterrupted devotion of nearly five years. Husband, lover, nurse,—not one of these has Robert been to me, but all three together. I neither regret my marriage therefore, nor the manner of it, because the manner of it was a necessity of the act."

After this it was taken more for granted that her friends knew how brilliantly the dreary season of her youth had passed into this midsummer of deep content.

The most striking impression gained from Mrs.

[1] Mrs. Jameson.

Browning's letters and from the reminiscences of those who knew her and her husband, is of the great simplicity and naturalness characterising their life together. Fortunately for their happiness the soul of neither of them was entirely "above buttons," and there is no evidence that they felt the "incessant strain" of constant intellectual companionship which Mr. Morley has detected in the home life of George Eliot. Their days were planned with reference to their work, each of them writing poetry as they might have written history, at regular hours and for a stated period of time. Beyond this they fed their minds bountifully with matter-of-fact duties and interests as well as with music and painting and books.

In work Browning was the erratic one of the two, and at times the responsibility of continuous writing slipped easily away from him. For relaxation he plunged into painting or modelling in clay, having no trace of his wife's passion for novel-reading. Visitors who came to them expecting discourse on poetry or on poetic themes were most refreshingly disappointed. Unlike Tennyson, Browning seems seldom to have broken through the reserve that kept him from exhibiting the depths of his nature as a matter of common interest. In talk he chose "anything but the cant of literary circles," and preferred to quote the worst poetry he knew, having stores of doggerel in reserve for those who craved æsthetic amusement. Equally characteristic,

however, was the contempt he felt for parodies as vulgarising what truly is great or beautiful. No one acquainted with his poetry can doubt what is commonly said of him, that he liked to talk, that talking was a joyous exercise to him, indulged in with inexhaustible relish, and his memory was so keen for odds and ends of fact and rhyme and knowledge that conversation with him must have been as stimulating as it was fluent. In Carlyle's account of a trip they made together this sentence stands out :

" And so away we went, Browning talking very loud and with vivacity, I silent rather, tending towards many thoughts."

Mrs. Browning's " agreeable low voice " was also ardent in discussion, and Hawthorne describes her as " of that quickly appreciative and responsive order of woman with whom I can talk more freely than with any man ; and she has, besides, her own originality, wherewith to help on conversation, though, I should say, not of a loquacious tendency."

There has never been any better personal description of the Brownings as they appeared together than the simple, firm outline given in Mrs. Ritchie's note taken from her girlish diary :

" She is very small, she is brown, with dark eyes and dead brown hair ; she has white teeth, and a low, curious voice ; she has a manner full of charm and kindness ; she rarely laughs, but is always cheerful and smiling ; her eyes are very bright. Her husband is not unlike her. He is short ; he is dark,

with a frank, open countenance ; long hair, streaked with grey ; he opens his mouth wide when he speaks ; he has white teeth."

The intense nervous irritability from which both suffered is the background giving strong relief to the charm of their relation. With Browning's gentleness and kindness of disposition went a superfluity of vital energy which, in Mrs. Browning's words, "struck its fangs into him" when he was not actively employed, and he had his hours of extreme depression, fairly matching the innate melancholy of his wife's temperament. The fact that their intercourse, so far as may be judged from the intimate records of passing days and moods, was the perfection of good-humour and mutual understanding,—the equivalent of forbearance—is eloquent testimony to their fitness for each other in practical as in ideal respects.

That they held independent opinions on many subjects was, of course true ; and Mrs. Browning's credulity in the matter of spiritualism probably came nearest being the rock of danger in the lively course of their discussions.

That Browning, in spite of his mystical tendencies, was not credulous is sufficiently obvious from his poem *Mr. Sludge, the Medium.* In Dr. Berdoe's *Encyclopædia* an admirable analysis of the poem is followed by a protest against the stupidity by which arguments used by Sludge in favour of his profession have been fastened now and again upon Browning as expressions of his personal view.

"Mrs. Browning was an ardent spiritualist," he says, "and Mr. Browning, in consequence, had considerable experience of the ways of mediums and the talk and arguments of their followers. Although no medium ever reasoned with such skill and subtlety as Sludge, the main arguments used by this impostor are precisely those put forward by spiritualists. The mediums are a wretchedly weak, invertebrate order of beings, quite incapable of any such virile processes of thought as those expressed in the poem. There could be no greater mistake than to suppose that Mr. Browning meant to make any defence for any phase of spiritualism whatever; he has simply gathered into a poem the best which could be put forward for spiritualism and directed it upon the personality of Sludge. Intimate friends of the Brownings assure me that Mr. Browning with great difficulty restrained his disgust at the practices of spiritualists, and his annoyance at the fact that his wife devoted so much time and attention to this aspect of human folly. Perhaps the feature which angered him most was the habit of trading upon and outraging the most sacred feelings of the human heart in the endeavour to gain clients for a money-making occupation."

There is no sign in the letters that Browning ever failed to "restrain his disgust," or that any serious difference arose between himself and his wife on the subject. In fact, allusions to his being "interested" though "sceptical," and to amiable concessions in

particular cases, indicate that he showed a quite subtle consideration in expressing his disapproval. Mrs. Browning's impulse toward belief may be explained in part by her interest in contemporary problems, spiritualism in its modern form having descended upon America and invaded Europe during the decade between 1845 and 1855. "You know I am rather a visionary," she wrote, "and inclined to knock round at all the doors of the present world to try to get out." Thus when the mania for table-tipping and rapping, and spirit-writing, began to spread in Florentine society she threw herself into the controversy with the zeal of a pioneer nature.

This modernity of interest shows itself in her work in marked contrast to Browning's pre-occupation with the history, the romance, and politics of past centuries. When the idea of a novel written in verse occurred to her she determined that it should "comprehend the aspect and manners of modern life" and "flinch at nothing conventional." The idea was carried out in *Aurora Leigh,* published in 1856, nine years after the publication of *Jane Eyre* to which it has been said to owe its inspiration. A similarity of plot certainly exists ; both heroines are under the care of an unsympathetic aunt ; in each case the aunt dies suddenly ; in each case also the hero loses his eyesight through saving a human being from a fire in which his house burns down. The resemblance was either accidental, or the result of indirect and unconscious suggestion, however, as

a letter from Mrs. Browning to Mrs. Jameson reveals.

One passage in the poem gives direct expression to its author's philosophy of poetry :

> Poets should
> Exert a double vision ; should have eyes
> To see near things as comprehensibly
> As if afar they took their point of sight,
> And distant things, as intimately deep,
> As if they touched them. Let us strive for this.
> I do distrust the poet who discerns
> No character or glory in his times,
> And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
> Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
> Oh, not to sing of lizards or of toads
> Alive i' the ditch there !—'t were excusable ;
> But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,
> Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
> As dead as must be, for the greater part,
> The poems made on their chivalric bones.
> And that 's no wonder : death inherits death.
> Nay, if there 's room for poets in the world
> A little overgrown (I think there is)
> Their sole work is to represent the age,
> Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing age,
> That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
> And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
> Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
> Than Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles.
> To flinch from modern varnish, coat, or flounce,
> Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
> Is fatal,—foolish too. King Arthur's self
> Was commonplace to Lady Guinever ;
> And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat
> As Regent street to poets.

The first edition of *Idylls of the King* was published in 1859, too late for any suspicion of its con-

nection with this remonstrance which, nevertheless, is pertinent to Tennyson's unreality of impression. That Mrs. Browning, herself, flinched visibly in the presence of reality pure and simple, is shown by her commentary on the performance of *La Dame aux Camélias:* "The exquisite acting, the too literal truth to nature everywhere, was *exasperating*—there was something profane in such familiar handling of life and death. Art has no business with real grave-clothes when she wants tragic drapery."

Browning, who undeniably possessed the power to see "distant things as intimately deep as though he touched them," had a much keener sense of the separation between reality and the shows of reality, and of the true significance between the outward and visible sign and the informing spirit. That his favourite novel was *Madame Bovary* in which "intensity of illusion" dominates all other qualities, is testimony to his consistency in realism.

During the fifteen years of their married life the Brownings left Italy three times for trips of several months' duration. To travel was a passion with both of them and in Paris particularly the "blaze of life" delighted them. Mrs. Browning was seldom the worse for a journey and entered with infinite gayety into the drama of new places. In the city swimming in verdure and "beautiful as Venice on the waters," she cared like a child for the bright green trees and gardens, the restaurants and the dining *à la carte*, the "mixing up one's dinner with heaps of

newspapers," the shops, and prints, the cocked hat of M. le Président, the snug apartments, the fêtes and processions. Her letters show also that in spite of her long seclusion she met new people with enthusiasm and was easily pleased with difficult temperaments. Carlyle she found "the most interesting man" she could imagine, and "understood perfectly" that his "bitterness was only melancholy and his scorn sensibility." A letter from Mazzini gave her access to George Sand, and that positive, impulsive, liberal personality distinctly appealed to her, as it did not to Browning, who found incivility in the "calm disdain" of manner with which the Frenchwoman met her worshipping circle.

When they visited England they saw Tennyson, Rossetti, Ruskin, Carlyle, and other friends, and went more or less into general society as they did also during the latter part of their life in Italy.

Wherever they went and whatever they did they gave the impression of people perpetually interested in the human spectacle, and resolute to get from experience every legitimate satisfaction. They were neither Bohemian nor Philistine, yet something of each was in them. They carried into a simple and even sedate routine of work and play the spirit of vagabondage, a liberal delight in the passing hour and trivial incident.

"Forty days! that is almost the life of a man, if one counts in life only the moments worth counting," said M. de Boufflers; but for these two the time was extended to fifteen years.

CHAPTER VI.

BROWNING'S MEN AND WOMEN.

THE title of the two volumes published in 1855, when Browning was forty-three, and had been nine years married, might very well stand as the title of his complete work from *Pauline* to *Asolando*. From first to last his theme is "men and women," and he divides his interest quite impartially between the complexities of masculine and feminine character. For this reason, among many others, he is separated from the sentimental poets to whom the *ewig weibliche* means pretty much one thing; whose heroines are dark or fair, passionate or gentle, but singularly unresourceful, intellectually and emotionally.

He, himself, in the lines called *Poetics,* indicates the angle made by his method with that of the rhapsodists. It is "the foolish" who say "flower" and "rose" and "swan, she is," or "maid-moon." No such "vain words" from him:

> Be the moon the moon: my love I place beside it;
> What is she? Her human self,—no lower word will serve.

The fact that "her human self" is conspicuously endowed with a faculty for introspective analysis of alloyed motives and emotions brings her into comparison with the heroines of novels and plays,—of Meredith's novels and of Shakespeare's plays, to make the favourite choice of Browning critics,—and not with the heroines of Tennyson, or Rossetti, or Byron, or Burns, or Spenser, or even Chaucer who knew so many histories of "wemen goode and trewe."

Browning's women have been complained of as too intellectual, but in mental capacity they certainly do not outdo those Portias and Beatrices and Katharines whose parts were played by half-grown boys in that austere "plaie-house on the Bancke in the Parishe of Saint-Saviour's called the Globe," and in whom the reasoning faculties were never considered disagreeably preponderant. The difference lies, perhaps, in the absence of a lightness of wit, which is by no means an especially feminine characteristic, but which Browning could not give to his women because he did not himself possess it in any marked degree, and which Shakespeare could be lavish of because he had it in such abundance. Certainly, if we look to Browning's heroines for sallies of brilliant mockery or even of clever playfulness we shall not be satisfied; and, since they are represented chiefly by monologues, they have an air of self-consciousness that interferes with the potent charm they undoubtedly possess. It is this defect in the manner of their

expression much more than the matter of their thought that gives them their disquieting aspect of *bas-bleus*.

Moreover, they share, with Browning's men, the excessive loquacity which lessens the vigor of his otherwise robust and masculine style. How much the style was of the man could not be known before the publication of the letters to Miss Barrett. A reviewer in *The Academy* once wrote :

"Browning's characters think aloud under all circumstances. A dialogue between two lovers, in a given difficult situation, is with him a matter in which both not only think, but feel aloud to each other, as never two lovers did or could." That two lovers could and did thus think and feel aloud to each other is now proven beyond dispute.

It is shallow enough to assume that such redundant self-expression is evidence of a shallow mind, but it can hardly be denied that in Browning's case it is evidence of a somewhat disorderly mind. As Landor put it : "Few of the Athenians had such a quarry on their property, but they constructed better roads for the conveyance of the material." And as Browning's characters are obliged to follow the roads provided by their creator, they frequently make but stumbling progress toward unity of effect. One of the two requisites of a great writer, according to Matthew Arnold's formula, he therefore lacks. No stretch of the imagination can grant him "a perfectly sound and classical style." To the other and more

important requisite, however,—ideas that are both "new and profound,"—he has, perhaps, more claim than any other Victorian poet.

One of these ideas underlies a singularly magnanimous conception of the relation between men and women, a conception as far removed from the old, narrow spirit of chivalry as from the later spirit of purely romantic sentiment. Mr. Swinburne has assigned him the palm "for depth of pathos and subtlety of knowledge" as against M. Leconte de Lisle's "height of spirit and sublimity of song," and if we trace to its source "the piercing and overpowering tenderness which glorifies the poet of Pompilia," we shall find it arises from an intense belief in the value of unselfishness in love as a moral force in a world where crude impulses clash with self-restraint to make of every strenuous nature a field of repeated battles.

A sentence in one of his letters to Miss Barrett confirms the impression given by a large proportion of his love-poems: "The selfishness I deprecate," he says, "is one which a good many women, and men too, call 'real passion'—under the influence of which I ought to say, 'be mine, whatever happens to *you.*'"

The fact that in a small proportion of the poems this personal conviction is ignored completely for the sake of an adequate interpretation of the wild temper he "deprecates" and marvellously divines, has inspired many of his critics with a sense of his "Bohe-

mian" tendencies, and the lesson of *The Statue and the Bust* has been pertinently quoted to prove that zeal was for him the chief virtue however unworthy its object. "There is no sin for him like repression," says Mr. Stedman, "no sting like regret, no requital for the opportunity slighted and gone by."

But if we stop there we miss the real Browning who could not by any possibility glorify the vice and folly by which unhappiness is sown among innocent people. His question, the answer to which he seeks with indefatigable energy and inexhaustible interest, is that formulated by the Duke of Argyll: "What are the moral limits imposed upon human desires, tastes, and aspirations, within which alone they can be useful or beneficent?" While the "unlit lamp and the ungirt loin" were hateful to him, undeniably, and while, when he shows you

> —— how the devil spends
> A fire God gave for other ends,

he is less contemptuous than when one of the church of the Laodiceans comes under his consideration; the ultimate interest that such intensity of soul has for him lies in the larger possibilities it offers of reaching good through evil, as he puts it.

> When a soul has seen
> By the means of Evil that Good is best,

then the lawless activities of human nature are converted into allies, and the goal becomes a true Nirvana, in which peace and rest mean equilibrium and

continual enjoyment of the good alone without the sting of evil :

> —— the child grown man, you burn the rod,
> The uses of labour are surely done ;
> There remaineth a rest for the people of God.

To reach this conclusion Browning frequently requires his readers to pass with him through tolerably scandalous localities, and investigate with him situations of undoubted impropriety. *The Ring and the Book, A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, Fifine at the Fair,* and many of the shorter poems give pictures of a sinister and disenchanting world in which the men and women sorely need a biographer keen to distinguish "instincts immature" and "purposes unsure," in making up the main account of their lives ; one who like Balaustion peers beneath the painted mask to catch the true expression of the face.

And in this mixed world of his poetry, as in actual life, it is sometimes the women and sometimes the men who play the nobler part. Perhaps a smaller number of the former than of the latter reach the standard of self-sacrificing devotion which he adopts as the ideal standard of conduct for both sexes. Even in the recognised masterpiece of his creation, Pompilia, the sacrificing instinct of motherhood is developed at the cost of the man who will serve her turn. In the interests of her child she does not hesitate to let Caponsacchi "put his breast between the spears and her," and bring upon himself the peril of Guido's revenge ; while he, "all blindness, bravery,

and obedience," risks everything at the first word of her demand. Pompilia trusts "in the compensating great God" to save and to reward him, although she had found her faith insufficient to meet her own need.

More obvious instances of a nature in which the supreme element of generosity is lacking, are such characters as Phene, the artist's model in *Pippa Passes,* and Andrea del Sarto's vain and sordid wife. The former, made of commonest clay, without knowledge or instinct to guide her, absorbs the opportunities and gifts of her lover in her own fruitless existence: the latter, baser in motive, fetters the impulse and capability of Andrea's brain, careless of his ambitions, dulling his insight, starving his affections, and robbing him of the friends, the praise, and joyous pride of his "long festal year at Fontainebleau."

In each of these cases the man exhibits the curious temper of acquiescence that almost invariably enters into Browning's conception of heroism; and finds expression wherever his imaginary lovers are at odds with fortune. It is not quite the philosophy uttered by Pendennis when he finds himself a victim to his own ill-considered act, but it is at least as much like it as Browning is like Thackeray. Pendennis discovers that life is usually a disappointment, and reflects that he never knew anybody who was quite happy, or had not to ransom himself out of the hands of Fate with the payment of some dearest treasure

or other. "And do you think my lot is easier to bear because I own that I deserve it?" he concludes.

With a similar pride in not rebelling against the inevitable, Andrea, musing clear-sighted upon the dragging chains of his bondage to Lucrezia, admits his responsibility; and Jules uncomplainingly accepts his task of developing Phene's awakened intelligence, letting go aspirations not again to be entertained. Where, as in *The Last Ride Together,* the prize is unattainable after the utmost effort, failure is unmixed with bitterness and the attitude of the one rebuffed quite different from "the latent tendency to scold and whine" which Mr. Swinburne has discovered in Tennyson's heroes:

> Since nothing all my love avails,
> Since all my life seemed meant for fails,
> Since this was written and needs must be—
> My whole heart rises up to bless
> Your name in pride and thankfulness.

This is the disarming response of Browning's self-respecting lover, who seems to accept Stevenson's definition of love as "the essence of kindness," of "passionate kindness: kindness, so to speak, run mad."

And in the poem *James Lee's Wife* this same depth of tenderness and incapacity to blame the hand that strikes is revealed in the woman, who, despised and rejected by her husband, dissects the fabric of circumstance in which she has been shrouded, to reach the conclusion that if she could ever again

believe him loving her as he is loved by her, then might miracles happen:

> ——should I know or care
> When I should be dead of joy, James Lee?

Nowhere, however, does the principle of true self-sacrifice flower so winningly and with so little the pose of martyrdom, as in the interpretation of Alkestis whose gracious story is sung by the blithe young Greek Balaustion. It has been more than once suggested that the womanly and wifely charm of this Hellenic figure was connected in Browning's mind with the memory of his own wife, dead when the poem was written. Its association with her interest in Euripides is plain from the introductory quotation from her *Wine of Cypress,* commencing "Our Euripides the human," and from the allusion to

> The poetess who graved in gold
> Among her glories that shall never fade
> This style and title to Euripides.

To the singular perfection of his married life we must also credit much of Browning's wisdom concerning "the institution of the dear love of comrades." He was qualified, certainly, to understand the comradeship possible between a man and a woman where the two natures are fundamentally alike, and mutual respect and comprehension can join forces with depth of feeling; but his poetry includes no such discussion of the "woman problem" as

Tennyson undertook in *The Princess.* He had no formula for the benefits to be derived from

> Two heads in council, two beside the hearth,
> Two in the tangled business of the world,
> Two in the liberal offices of life.

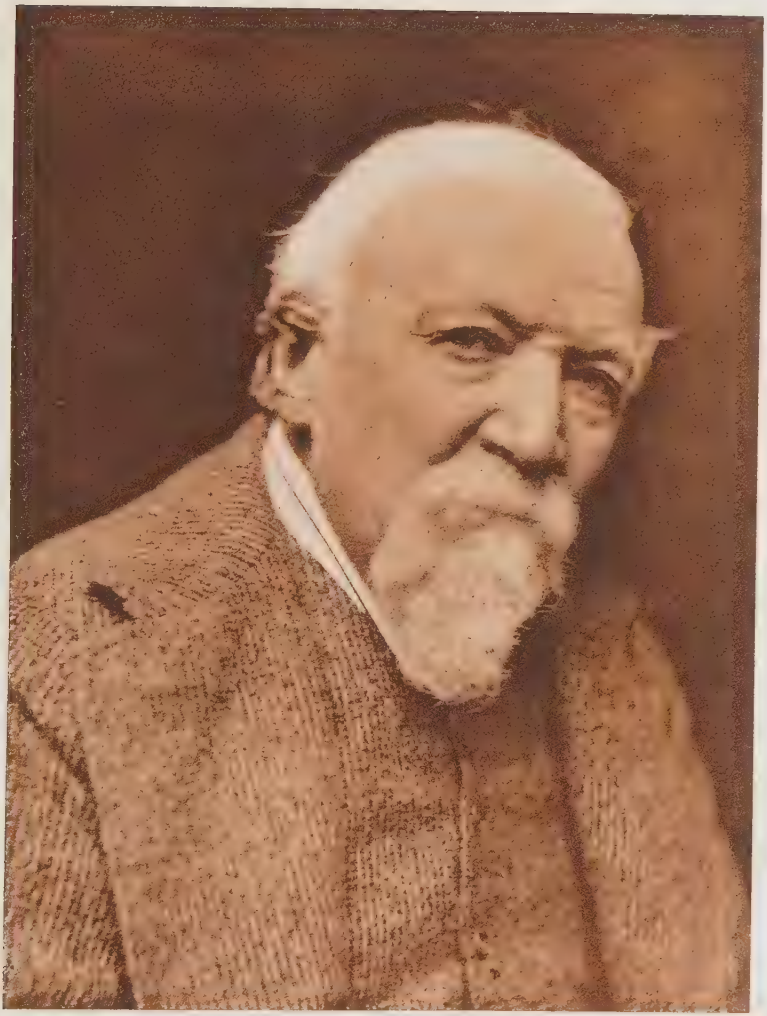
He substitutes for abstract theories an ardent impression of the joy of living when heart and brain are alike worthily dedicated to one great affection.

Into the poem *By the Fireside,* which has the veritable and unmistakable accent of personal feeling, he has put his ideal of womanhood as he knew it through the one who was "dearest and greatest and best" to him in life as in genius. With her in his thought he reviews the past,—

> In pride
> To think how little I dreamed it led
> To an age so blest that, by its side,
> Youth seemed the waste instead,—

and looks forward to "where the years conduct" beyond the limitations of the known :

> Think, when our one soul understands
> The great word which makes all things new,
> When earth breaks up and heaven expands,
> How will the change strike me and you
> In the house not made with hands?
>
> Oh, I must feel your brain prompt mine,
> Your heart anticipate my heart,
> You must be just before, in fine,
> See and make me see for your part,
> New depths of the divine.



The permanence of this affection, woven of many mingled strands of intellectual and emotional correspondence, is shown by the poems written after the sweet thin voice that so much inspired him ceased to be heard. It was three years before he wrote the noble *Prospice,* ending in a passionate expression of his personal belief in immortality :

> For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
> The black minute 's at end,
> And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
> Shall dwindle, shall blend,
> Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
> Then a light, then thy breast,
> O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
> And with God be the rest.

It was seven years before he recorded his undiminished sense of loss in the introduction to *The Ring and the Book :*

> Never may I commence my song, my due
> To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
> Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
> That still, despite the distance and the dark,
> What was, again may be ; some interchange
> Of grace, some splendour once they very thought,
> Some benediction anciently thy smile.

With this model constantly in mind it is not surprising that his conceptions of women almost invariably include characteristics that stir the imagination, and engage the interest more deeply than is usual with heroines of poetry.

It is a dangerous pastime to attempt to discover how far a writer's characters are a reflection of him-

self: but a few of the qualities with which Browning's are endowed are too conspicuously in accord with his own temperament to be neglected as evidence of his goodness and attractiveness, of the real charm and power of his nature as those who knew him felt it, and as those who study him apprehend it.

Thus, the sentiment of compassion toward the weak or injured is not only a part of the very framework of his poetry, in which the disappointed, the misinterpreted, those balked and crushed by fortune, are chosen to receive immortality so far as it lay in his power to bestow it, but is the notable characteristic of many of his *dramatis personæ*. In one of the slighter poems of *Asolando* three Court ladies vie with one another in "esteeming the love of a man." The Duchesse would prefer "a lady's true lover," one faithful to God, to the King, and to his sweetheart. The Marquise demands not merely fine thoughts, but fine deeds, a paladin's service. The Comtesse makes choice of "a wretch thrice accurst," who finds in her love his refuge from earth and men's noise, while the names of "infidel," "traitor," are cast up at him. According to the poem this last choice "seems terribly like what, perhaps, gains God's preference," and there is no doubt whatever of the preference in Browning's own mind. No less compassionate intelligence could possibly have conceived the poem called *The Worst of It*; and this tenderness of heart is extended to birds and beasts, for we find him not only writing anti-vivisectionary

poems, but singing the praises of a toad who loved him, and cherishing such repellent creatures as snakes and owls in his household.

Curiously enough, children seemed to awaken no special sympathy in him; and there are no poems the pathos of which depends upon the part they play in the world. That he was ready to serve or please them is shown not only by his affectionate devotion to his own child, but also by the famous *Pied Piper of Hamelin,* written for a sick child of Macready, to give him a subject for illustrative drawings. But none of the fondness which dimmed Thackeray's spectacles at the sight of young faces and the sound of young voices can be attributed to him. Childhood recognises no failure, no poignant sense of hopes relinquished or opportunities gone by; no one despises it, and every one is indulgent to it: for that reason, perhaps, it made less appeal to Browning than the more complicated periods of life.

Another characteristic of his experience which finds adequate expression in his poems is the zest with which the offices of friendship may be fulfilled. The most conspicuous instance to be found in his biographical records is the Landor episode. Poor Landor, who inspired in Mrs. Browning both amusement and irritation, was practically on Browning's hands in Italy, an exile from his own family, and an octogenarian victim of circumstance and temperament, turning against his friends as freely as against his foes. Browning felt that he owed more as a

writer to the old Hellenist than to any contemporary; and, though he had seen him but three or four times in his life, he generously took upon himself, at Landor's desire, the management of all his affairs, arranging every detail of his life with only the reward of his extremely uncertain gratitude.

Landor, was of course, unhappy, and in one of her letters Mrs. Browning wrote that he could only be soothed by having his own works quoted to him, a service Browning readily performed. This mischievous allusion suggests the poem written many years before, in which the service of David to the despairing king is so fervently given. It is easy to read Browning's own energy of devotion in the song of the young shepherd striving to restore to "Saul the mistake, Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now," his lost self-respect, by recounting the days of his glory and achievement. If anyone could have saved such a situation from its humiliating and ridiculous aspect Browning could, with his prodigious susceptibility to the pathos of a greatly aspiring and greatly defeated nature. This deference to noble qualities in others constitutes his great claim to humility of a genuine and dignified sort. Many of his characters share this trait, which is not conventional humbleness at all. With all their urgent sense of the importance to themselves of every event in their lives, and their persistent determination to squeeze from experience the last drop of its juice, sweet or bitter, they seldom make the mistake of

ROBERT BROWNING'S IDEA OF THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN

overestimating their infinitesimal part in the great scheme of the universe. The "stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too," saves them from arrogance on the one hand and equally from self-depreciation on the other. Nothing human is alien to them nor anything divine. David is appalled by his arrogance in seeking to surpass the Creator in his love for the king; but his effort toward the best—"the spark within the clod"—removes him by many degrees from the peril of the humble-minded,—the tendency to become oppressed by the insignificance of the individual, and to forfeit self-respect by sinking in the scale.

With this union of humility and pride Browning seems to have been as nearly as possible without vanity. One of his friends declared after his death that, with a single exception, she had never heard him speak of himself or of his poems in the presence of a third person. He shrank from ostentation of every kind, most of all from ostentatious exclusiveness. He enjoyed mingling with simple people and taking part in simple pleasures. He was kind to servants and helpful in the duties of every-day life. He was so generous in his appreciations that his criticisms of the work of other writers was far less valuable than that of his wife. Of his own works he possessed no complete edition until the Browning Society gave him one. He counted among his friends dukes and duchesses, peasants and artisans. For himself he was contented with modest, even disagreeable sur-

roundings, and no pension or title was ever suggested for him. The long period of indifference to his poetry on the part of English readers he endured by no means without sorrow and not entirely without resentment, but in a spirit fairly represented by the well-known two stanzas from *The Ring and the Book:*

> Such, British Public, ye who like me not
> (God love you!)—whom I yet have laboured for,

and

> So, British Public, who may like me yet
> (Marry and amen!)—

When he was finally known to a circumscribed but enthusiastic following his sturdy simplicity of manner suffered no change.

In his poems we find no single character, man or woman, of such divergent traits so harmoniously mingled; none so gentle and spirited, so zealous and so controlled, so genial in pleasure and of such sobriety in taste as he himself. Landor wrote of him:

> Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
> No man hath walkt along our roads with step
> So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
> So varied in discourse;

and in his own picture of the poet who went "up and down Valladolid" the modest faculty of observation is given the place it evidently held in his scheme of life:

He stood and watched the cobbler at his trade,
The man who slices lemons into drink,
The coffee-roaster's brazier, and the boys
That volunteer to help him turn his winch.
He glanced o'er books on stalls with half an eye,
And fly-leaf ballads on the vender's string,
And broad-edge bold-print posters by the wall.
He took such cognisance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw ;
If any cursed a woman, he took note ;
Yet stared at nobody.

The commentators of the future who build up their own biography of him from the hints and revelations of his poetry and letters, will doubtless find in him the scholarship of his Grammarian, the philosophic mind of his Ben Ezra, the religious and artistic intensity of his Abt Vogler, the chivalrous instinct of his Caponsacchi, the humour of his Lippo Lippi, the loyalty of his David, the passion of his Valence. They also may stray farther and fasten upon him the ambition of Sordello or the despair of Saul ; but with one class of his various types they cannot in the most extreme perversity confuse him—the class, that is, of the hypocrites and men of double aim : the Hohenstiel-Schwangaus, the Sludges, the Chiappanos, the Djabals, whom he knew through observation alone and not from any spring of sympathy within himself.

CHAPTER VII.

ETHICAL TEACHING.

THAT the world is on the whole a benefit to everyone is, according to Emerson, the only reason to be given for its existence. It is the only reason that Browning gives, the only one that seems to him in the least convincing, and one that is confirmed not merely by every star that lights the heavens, but by every stone that blocks the pathway. What Tennyson called his "depressing optimism" is a part of the fabric of his thought, and he is never weary of explaining by the faith that is in him all that seems to be perverse and unsound and futile in our complex data of experience. His acquiescence in the existing order of things is militant: with Antoninus he inquires: "But that which does not make a man worse, how can it make a man's life worse?"

For his peculiar mind the "problem of evil" hardly exists, so plain does it look to him that ultimately "evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound," and that the temptations, struggles, and grim failures through which we pass are not even checks to our upward progress, but

Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

This feature of the teaching which is the confessed aim of the greater part of his poetry, stands out in strong relief, and most of his readers find in it encouragement and exhilaration. It is like a bright invincible armour with which to protect our vulnerable temperaments, attacked on every side by visible sins and horrors and mistakes in battalions. It suggests a vision of the Judgment day infinitely removed from that evoked by Milton's decree that whoever disobeys

Breaks union, and that day,
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
Int' utter darkness, deep ingulfed, his place
Ordained without redemption, without end.

It substitutes for the languor of despondency into which those oppressed by misfortune are inclined to fall, a zest of energy to climb the rugged places, and reach, by means of the only path open, heights of character and the joy of victory.

Optimism so definite and so strenuous almost necessarily implies belief in an absolutely powerful and loving Creator. At the end of *Asolando,* as in *Paracelsus,* Browning emphasises the sympathetic working of "power" and "love" in the plan of the universe; and repeatedly in the intervening poems we meet these same expressions used with the same significance. "God's love, in Browning's mind,"

Professor Royce explains, "does not mean merely or even mainly his tenderness or pity for us, or his desire to see us happy in his own arbitrarily appointed way, but his delight in our very oddities, in the very narrowness of our ardent individuality. It means his sharing of our very weaknesses, his sympathy with even our low views of himself, so long as all these things mean our growing like the plant in the mine that has never seen the light. If God views our lives in this way, then, and only then, does he love us. He must love us, at the very least, as the artist loves his creations, heartily, open-mindedly, joyously, not because we are all fashioned in one abstract image, but because in our manifoldness we all together reflect something of the wealth of life in which he abounds. This is the view of Aprile, never later abandoned by Browning."

Such an interpretation of God's love for man is too personal and concrete to exclude the idea of the Incarnation, and in many of Browning's poems—in *Saul,* and in *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day,* and in *Karshish*—we get suggestions of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity. Browning did not, however, permit himself to argue the question, or even to impress it as strongly as he impresses his hope of immortality upon the reader. In *La Saisiaz* this hope is based first on the assumption that no divine intelligence would illogically destroy souls for which such elaborate processes of discipline had been prepared; and, secondly, on the conviction born of passionate

desire that the dead shall meet and know each other; the conviction which Dante recorded and Browning echoed:

"Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another better, there where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured."

This optimism of cheering and bracing belief has been called the defiance of facts, and certain facts the strong "fighter" of *Prospice* did indeed defy. Whatever the apparent depth of night and storm, or stress of battle, he

> Never doubted clouds would break,
> Never dreamed though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
> Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
> Sleep to wake.

How unlike is this impetus of faith in a God-governed universe to the agnostic temper can be seen in no way more clearly than by comparing Browning's moral attitude with that of Matthew Arnold, his peer in brave interrogation of problems transcending codes and dogmas. In Arnold's philosophy, the impersonal sense of honour, the obligation of nobility, is so deeply rooted that neither creed nor hope is required for its support:

> Hath man no second life?—*Pitch this one high!*
> Sits there no Judge in Heaven, our sins to see?—
> *More strictly then the inward judge obey!*
> Was Christ a man like us? *Ah! let us try*
> *If we then, too, can be such men as he!*

In *Rabbi ben Ezra* Browning exuberantly expresses the overwhelming gratitude of a responsive nature toward a Creator who has conceived an earth so fair, a destiny so inspiring, opportunities so superbly difficult, such salutary afflictions, such stimulating rebuffs, such a resisting element to cleave on one's journey toward the happy goal where passion, malice, and delusion shall be destroyed for ever. The prayer of the Rabbi is the exultant recognition of the healthy soul that labour and striving are not merely endurable, but joyous, provided the mental and moral system is unimpaired by disease. The strong man delighteth to run in a race and a buoyant spirit has no quarrel with fate:

> Gifts should prove their use
> I own the past profuse
> Of power each side, perfection every turn;
> Eyes, ears took in their dole,
> Brain treasured up the whole;
> Should not the heart beat once, "How good to live and learn"?
>
> Not once beat "Praise be thine!
> I see the whole design,
> I who saw power see now Love perfect, too:
> Perfect I call thy plan:
> Thanks that I was a man!
> Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what thou shalt do!"

It is interesting to know that the Ben Ezra, or Ibn Ezra, of history, whom Browning chose in this case for his mouthpiece, actually held these views of life in the face of worldly unsuccess. "I strive to grow rich," he is reported to have said, "but the stars are

against me. If I sold shrouds, none would die. If candles were my wares the sun would not set till the day of my death."[1]

The attitude of mind, however, has always been closely identified with Browning's own, and rightly so, as it is merely the most striking statement of a belief that takes various forms in various poems, but is seldom entirely absent from any important division of his writing.

Nothing could be more different from Ben Ezra's spiritual energy than the immeasurable melancholy of the chant of Empedocles, in that poem the reprint of which Arnold dedicated to Browning because it had found such favour in his eyes.

In each case the new wine of the nineteenth century is poured into the old bottles of forgotten philosophies. In each case the problem faced is that of man's ignorance concerning his destiny, and concerning the hindrances and defilements of his earthly existence. In each case a knowledge and authority above the knowledge and authority of man is recognised with deference.

But the Greek, beholding from his lonely mountain the panorama of the natural world and the littleness of men passing to and fro, sees things as they are to the keenly sceptical vision. Not truth as he wants it to be, not more sincerity of intention, is sufficient to him. Again and again he sifts his intuitions and weighs them against his observations to the end that

[1] See Berdoe's *Browning Encyclopædia*

he may regulate his conduct by the most exact standard of pure morality.

> No eye could be too sound
> To observe a world so vast,
> No patience too profound
> To sort what 's here amass'd ;
> How man may here best live no care too great to explore.

Thus looking hard and patiently he sees the changeless factors of tragedy, the perpetual weakness, and folly, and contradiction of human nature ; the obstinate desire for bliss, the obstinate or blind refusal to do that which will gain it, the dependence upon chance, the rebellion against punishment, the struggle we make to baffle our own prayers. What delusion in the cold light of this insight seems the rapturous conviction of the Rabbi ! —

> All I could never be,
> All, men ignored in me,
> This I was worth to God whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Yet there is close analogy between parts of the two poems. "Pleasant is this flesh," declares Ben Ezra :

> Let us not always say,
> "Spite of this flesh to-day
> I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole !"
> As the bird wings and sings,
> Let us cry, "All good things
> Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!"

And from his detached standpoint Empedocles also perceives that life may yield something more

than moderate return to those who bow to what they cannot break. After all is said,

> Is it so small a thing
> To have enjoy'd the sun,
> To have lived light in the spring,
> To have loved, to have thought, to have done ;
> To have advanced true friends, and beat down baffling foes—
> That we must feign a bliss
> Of doubtful future date,
> And, while we dream on this,
> Lose all our present state,
> And relegate to worlds yet distant our repose ?

Rabbi ben Ezra belongs to the group of poems published in 1864, bearing the title *Dramatis Personæ*. Six years before that Quaritch had printed FitzGerald's translation of Omar Khayyám, copies of which promptly found their way to the hands of Swinburne and Rossetti. That Browning, living in Italy, and finding "considerable difficulty in getting books," ran across the anonymous little volume is at least improbable.[1] Thus his use of the biblical metaphor—the relation of the clay and the potter symbolising the relation of man to his Maker—was, probably, due solely to the natural choice of symbols familiar to one who like Ben Ezra was an expert in biblical exegesis.

There is nevertheless an interesting similarity between Omar's glowing apostrophe to the jocund grape whose juice may fill the cup that crumbles into dust, and the Rabbi's exhortation:

[1] As Browning knew Rossetti at this time and letters passed between them, it is of course possible that through Rossetti FitzGerald's book may have reached him.

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash, and trumpets' peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips aglow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?

And the divergence between the tone of the Rabbi's mind toward him

Who fixed thee 'mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,

and that of Omar, watching

the game he plays
Upon this Checker-board of Nights and Days,

is even more interesting and suggestive.

In Browning's adaptation of Ben Ezra's passionate religion of hopefulness, the mood is that of veneration: how should the human creature desire more than to fulfil the plan of the Creator, or venture to pass judgment upon the divine arrangement of a puzzling system involving momentous difficulties?

In the Rubai'iyyát we find Ben Ezra's appreciation of Epicurean pleasures,—this "rose-mesh" of earthly interests in which we are entangled,—and we find also his contempt of the notion that a Creator will arbitrarily condemn his own creations:

What! out of senseless Nothing to provoke
A conscious Something to resent the yoke
Of unpermitted Pleasure, under pain
Of Everlasting Penalties if broke!

But we find not the slightest indication of that re-

verent humility, that worshipping love of the inferior for the superior nature and intelligence, with which the Hebrew is inspired. We find in place of it the tremendous assumption of equal rights between man and God, the pride of fellowship that puts into the mouth of the Persian these words of unsurpassed audacity :

> Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make
> And ev'n with Paradise devise the Snake :
> For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
> Is blacken'd—Man's Forgiveness give—and take !

This pessimistic view, rendered by FitzGerald with Celtic sensibility, spread among the minds ready to receive it as the ink of the cuttlefish upon the restless waters. Browning's influence was in precisely the opposite direction.

It would be a very superficial reading of the needs of this period of human development that discovered in his ethical message no tonic for a certain valetudinarian habit that prevails among the great army of half-thinkers. His invariable premise that life is worth while, his enthusiastic submission to discipline (in everything but his own art), his sincerity of conviction, and, more than anything else, his apprehension of what is meant by the " solidarity of man," his almost universal and unpatronising sympathy with the many forms taken by humanity, most of them ugly to the view,—all these qualities of his mind tend to counteract the feebleness of those who waste themselves in regret that the " Sea of faith " is indeed retreating from the shore on which we are.

Certain critics have found defect of this quality in the sentimentalism with which he has been not unjustly accused. If sentimentalism is false sentiment, there is, perhaps, a hint of it in his invariable tenderness toward the sinner despised and rejected of men. There is a measure of danger in pity so profound for misfortunes the root of which is frequently to be discovered in a vacillating will or in sophistication of the moral sense.

It is stimulating, certainly, to assume that by our failures we may rise to ultimate success; but the peril of such doctrine to all but the clearest thinkers lies in the further assumption that we cannot through any failure sink "and be astray for ever."

The errant gentleman in *Fifine at the Fair,* who understands the value of a lie, and attains

> To read
> The signs aright, and learn by failure, truth is forced
> To manifest itself through falsehood,

is at the mercy of his education, and not very close to morality at the end of his term. But it was not Browning's aim to serve those who cannot for themselves distinguish between the true and the false. His occasional excursions into other minds than those of his own type, his skill in playing for the moment devil's advocate and presenting arguments entirely out of harmony with his convictions, make him a guide of the most puzzling and dangerous sort for readers who do not possess his own combination of sturdy morality and flexible intelligence. For others

such persuasive sophistry as flows from the lips of Bishop Blougram, for example, the "arbitrary, accidental thoughts" which he chooses to represent as fixtures in his mind, are merely masterly foils to the simple, straightforward spiritual quality of Ben Ezra's communing with his God, or Abt Vogler's triumphant affirmation of faith.

The difficulty of defining Browning's positive message is increased for the ingenious commentator, whose ingenuity frequently exhausts itself on the most pellucid passages, by his habit of crowding his own beliefs into the same frame with those of his invented characters. For example no one doubts that he speaks his inmost persuasion in the courageous philosophy of *Easter Day:*

> And so I live, you see;
> Go through the world, try, prove, reject,
> Prefer, still struggling, to effect
> My warfare; happy that I can
> Be crossed and thwarted as a man,
> Not left in God's contempt apart,
> With ghastly smooth life, dead at heart,
> Tame in earth's paddock as her prize.

Yet he puts the same theory into the words of the astute, temporising, insincere Bishop:

> No, when the fight begins within himself
> A man 's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
> Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
> He 's left, himself, i' the middle; the soul wakes
> And grows.

This complex element in occurs almost all the poems supposed to express opinions of personages

entirely removed from Browning's essential sympathy, notably in *Fifine at the Fair,* the hero of which is a Molièresque Don Juan, and the most plausible of rascals. Such adroitness in assuming equivocal states of mind is a peculiar characteristic of Browning's genius, and one that grew with his increasing interest in "the dangerous side of things," his penetrating, imaginative observance of

> The honest thief, the tender murderer,
> The superstitious atheist,

who with difficulty keep their equilibrium on the giddy line between decency and dishonour. And sympathetic readers who distrust a vision that perceives only the one side, dark or light, of a moral question, are distinctly heartened by this range and variety of intellectual comprehension. The positive conviction which they can easily identify as Browning's own—the conviction that humanity's progress is regulated by a power that makes for righteousness through evil as well as through good—is infinitely more acceptable to them because it is advanced in the full light of interesting and potent fallacies.

To the purely pessimistic nature under the influence of an abiding sense of the misery and incongruity of life, Browning is not, however, a leader to arouse enthusiasm. His vigorous and reiterated confidence in the intelligence of our Creator cannot be reconciled to the mood of one who asks with Hardy,

Has some Vast Imbecility,
Mighty to build and blend,
But impotent to tend,
Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?

or groans with Omar,

Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

This class of minds may seek refuge in the poetry of Arnold, or even of Wordsworth, where the pagan serenity of the natural world is permitted to invade the mind, and rescue it from its "struggling, task'd morality," but they find in Browning's robust scorn of melancholy an irritating quality. The blaze of his optimism is blinding and painful to eyes sick with gazing at men and women placed here

as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

What Mr. Mortimer calls the "transcendental conclusion" to his intricate processes of thought, the inevitable arrival of his hopeful temperament at the point from which he sees a vision of heaven in which the "broken arcs" have met in a "perfect round," fails to invite those Spartans who meet death upright, with the beast of despair gnawing their flesh beneath the cloak of dignified philosophy.

The congregation to which he speaks most convincingly is a congregation comprising Christians,

and those who do not call themselves Christians but believe with Blougram that if you desire faith then you 've faith enough. The Dean of Canterbury has summed up the main lessons of his life and poetry, in a passage that demonstrates how little revolutionary is the real teaching found beneath that tumultuous, immoderate manner, sometimes so deceptive in its frankness:

"Live out truly, nobly, bravely, wisely, happily, your human life as a human life; not as a supernatural life, for you are a man, and not an angel; not as a sensual life, for you are a man, and not a brute; not as a wicked life, for you are a man, and not a demon; not as a frivolous life, for you are a man, and not an insect. Live each day the true life of a man to-day; not yesterday's life only, lest you become a murmurer; not to-morrow's life only, lest you become a visionary; but the life of happy yesterdays and confident to-morrows—the life of to-day unwounded by the Parthian arrows of yesterday, and undarkened by the possible cloudland of to-morrow. Life is indeed a mystery; but it was God who gave it, in a world 'wrapped round with sweet air, and bathed in sunshine, and abounding with knowledge'; and a ray of eternal light falls upon it even here, and that light shall wholly transfigure it beyond the grave."

This fairly represents the effect of Browning's ethical teaching upon a mind belonging to the household of Faith. A more startling indication of his

conformity with traditional belief is found in Cardinal Wiseman's review of *Men and Women* (1856). Though much of the matter in these poems is "extremely offensive" to Catholics, he says, "yet beneath the surface there is an undercurrent of thought that is by no means inconsistent with our religion; and if Mr. Browning is a man of will and action, and not a mere dreamer and talker, we should never feel surprise at his conversion." And Mr. Churton Collins, in his review of Dr. Berdoe's book on *Browning and the Christian Faith,* makes the same suggestion, after tracing Browning's indebtedness to Lessing for his theory of "a progressive revelation keeping pace with and aiding man's spiritual and moral progress."

"It is contended," says Mr. Collins, "that in *La Saisiaz* Browning speaks immediately in his own person, and that the result arrived at in *La Saisiaz* is pure Deism. My own impression of this poem is that it presents an exact parallel to Montaigne's *Apologie de Raimond Sebond.* It simply demonstrates the futility of human reason when attempting to grapple with problems insoluble by reason. It is, like Montaigne's Essay, a conclusive and unanswerable demonstration of the necessity of revelation if man is to be assured of what he desires, and to have that veil raised which otherwise death, and death only, can withdraw. As the next step to the position assumed by Dryden in his *Religio Laici* was the step he actually took—namely, the adoption of the Creed of Rome—so I contend the logical sequence

of the position assumed in *La Saisiaz* would be to take precisely the same step."

Beneath Browning's Christianity, however, beneath his concern for morality and for the problems of the "buried life," we find the source of his charm for diverse temperaments, the secret of his appeal to this century which has followed so many teachers and has outworn so many creeds. An inexhaustible spring of youthfulness is at the heart of his philosophies, an elasticity of soul that penetrates even the prolixity of his most tedious arguments, and makes his lyric poems enchanting. The prayer of Stagirius,

> From that torpor deep
> Wherein we lie asleep,
> Heavy as death, cold as the grave,
> Save, oh ! save,

is answered by his morning vigour of unsated interest. He teaches the supreme lesson of energy in living to a generation that inclines to the dilettante side. Matthew Arnold withdrew his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation because it belonged to the class of poems that represented morbid situations in which there was "everything to be endured, nothing to be done," in which suffering finds no vent in action, and a "continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance." No poem that Browning ever wrote could be included in that class. "Strive and thrive" is his password, and because he is so filled with the spirit that quickens, the spur of his ethical teaching is heeded by a languid race of men.

CHAPTER VIII.

ITALY.

THERE are signs of the German strain in Browning. His mysticism, his fondness for Hegelian philosophising, his attitude of interrogation, his interest in speculative science; those amazingly constructed sentences of his, and his contributions to the current English vocabulary—these are reminders of his German grandfather. Goethe said: "The artist must work from within outwards, seeing that, make what contortions he will, he can only bring to light his own individuality." In a sense, it is by his "contortions" that the German part of Browning's individuality is brought to light. But another strain, mingling with the German, modifying and, on the whole, dominating it, may have come from the Creole ancestress, Margaret Tittle. To this source it is tempting to trace his impulsiveness and versatility, checking his faculty of logical ratiocination just short of maturity, making him in truth more of a poet than a philosopher, and lending him potent affinities with Italy and the Southern races.

In his work, not only the style and the temper but

the choice of subjects show these contrasting tendencies. Italy, naturally enough, filled his thoughts during his fifteen years of life in Florence; but also it was an Italian theme he took for his first long metaphysical poem, and another for the most charming and individual of his descriptive poems, and still another for the play, *King Victor and King Charles,* when he had made but one brief and almost unrecorded visit to Italy. *Sordello* is evolved against the background of Italian history in the Middle Ages ; Pippa passes gayly through the little hill-town of Asolo ; in both the fascination of the mediæval memories is strong upon the mind of the poet. Before either of these was written, however, he had earnestly interpreted the aspirations of a German physician and reformer, and all through his work we find him turning from Lippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto to Abt Vogler of Würzburg and Fust of Mayence ; from Galuppi to Master Hugues ; from Bishop Blougram to Johannes Agricola ; from Pietro of Albano to Bernard de Mandeville.

Finally Italy claimed him, though not the Italy of which his wife has written, whose birth she witnessed and to whose happy growth she so ardently looked forward. Not modern Italy enticed and fascinated him, but the Italy of the Middle Ages and the dawning Renaissance ; and not the country or its people so much as their condition,—more corrupt, insincere, ambitious, and quarrelsome than any with whose details we are equally well acquainted. Here

he studied the low, confused, intricate, and always infinitely interesting common life, the daily circumstance of Florence and Rome and Mantua. The types he chooses are not the men of high genius and austere virtue, who, like Dante and Savonarola and Michelangelo, reflect the literary and artistic and moral splendour of the new era at their highest. He portrays for us a Renaissance bishop who loves luxury and art and precedence over his fellows; a mad fanatic, stirring the brands of socialism in a time of famine; a painter monk climbing from his window to seek in dissolute nights relief from arduous days; a greedy alchemist of Padua feeding fat on the superstitions of his time. In *Luria* we see the boundless perfidy, insolence, love of gain, the bitter hatred, jealousy, mistrust, envy, that marked the petty but cruel wars continually flaming from the crevices of the loose political structure of Italy in the fifteenth century. In *Sordello* we see the "lady city" and the bravo and mercenary whose name is translated "Dash-into-fight," the chief figure in the contest that is waged for possession of her by Guelph and Ghibbelline, with misery and carnage.

In *The Ring and the Book* the period is moved forward to the close of the seventeenth century, but the society is still much the same as is described in the tales of Boccaccio, in which passion, sensuality, and vice, petty or grand, are the topics with which refugees from death by plague beguile their empty hours. Browning had the story from an "old square

yellow book, part print, part manuscript," purchased for eight pence at a booth in the Square of San Lorenzo in Florence, in 1865. It so fascinated him that he read it through the day he bought it, and considered it for nearly four years, when there flowed from it the ambitious and original poem in which the murder case is reproduced from every point of view. Despite the great beauty of certain portions, and the chivalrous and noble defence of the wronged child, Pompilia, the whole unutterably vulgar tragedy belongs to the bad days of Italy, when crime alone seemed universally interesting.

John Ruskin, in his *Modern Painters,* has an eloquent passage, in which he pays a tribute to Browning's power of reconstructing the past, not always, certainly, precisely as it was, but always vividly and, in his later poems, with the various elements fused into an effective whole. The criticism is at once so characteristic of its author and so true of its subject, that it may not be curtailed. Shakespeare, Ruskin says, saw with the eyes of the sixteenth and not with those of the thirteenth century, and was content to paint nothing but what he saw. "How far in these modern days emptied of splendour," he continues, "it may be necessary for great men having certain sympathies for those earlier ages, to act in this differently from all their predecessors; and how far they may succeed in the resuscitation of the past by habitually dwelling in all their thoughts among vanished generations, are questions, of all practical and present ones concerning

art, the most difficult to decide: for already in poetry several of our truest men have set themselves to this task, and have indeed put more vitality into the shadows of the dead than most others can give the presence of the living. Thus Longfellow, in *The Golden Legend,* has entered more closely into the temper of the Monk, for good and for evil, than ever yet theological writer or historian, though they may have given their life's labour to the analysis; and, again, Robert Browning is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages; always vital, right, and profound; so that in the matter of art, with which we have been specially concerned, there is hardly a principle connected with the mediæval temper that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and too rugged rhymes of his. There is a curious instance, by the way, in a short poem referring to this very subject of tomb and image sculpture (previously discussed), and illustrating just one of those phases of local human character which, though belonging to Shakespeare's own age, he never noticed, because it was specially Italian and un-English; connected also closely with the influence of mountains on the heart, and therefore with our immediate inquiries. I mean the kind of admiration with which a Southern artist regarded the *stone* he worked in; and the pride which populace or priest took in possession of precious mountain substance, worked into the pavements of their cathedrals and the shafts of their tombs.

"Observe, Shakespeare, in the midst of architecture and tombs of wood or freestone or brass, naturally thinks of *gold* as the best enriching and ennobling substance for them :—in the midst also of the fever of the Renaissance he writes, as everyone else did, in praise of precisely the most vicious master of that school—Giulio Romano ; but the modern poet, living much in Italy, and quit of the Renaissance influence, is able fully to enter into the Italian feeling and to see the evil of the Renaissance tendency, not because he is greater than Shakespeare, but because he is in another element and has *seen* other things. I miss fragments here and there not needed for my purpose in the passage quoted, without putting asterisks, for I weaken the poem enough by the omissions, without spoiling it also by breaks.

THE BISHOP ORDERS HIS TOMB IN ST. PRAXED'S CHURCH

As here I lie
In this state chamber, dying by degrees,
Hours, and long hours, in the dead night, I ask,
Do I live—am I dead? Peace, peace, seems all.
St. Praxed's ever was the church of peace
And so, about this tomb of mine, I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know ;
Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care.
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south
He graced his carrion with.
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the airy dome where live

The angels, and a sunbeam 's sure to lurk.
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,
The odd one at my feet, where Anselm stands ;
Peach-blossom marble all.
Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years ;
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he ?
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons ? Black—
'T was ever antique-black I meant ! How else
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath ?
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
The Saviour at his Sermon on the Mount,
St. Praxed in a glory, and one Pan,
And Moses with the tables . . . but I know
Ye mark me not ! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm ? Ah, ye hope
To revel down my villas while I gasp,
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine,
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at !
Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then !
There 's plenty jasper somewhere in the world—
And have I not St. Praxed's ear to pray
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts ?
That 's if ye carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line—
Tully, my master ? Ulpian serves *his* need.

"I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the *Stones of Venice* put into as many lines,

Browning's being also the antecedent work. The worst of it is that this kind of concentrated writing needs so much *solution* before the reader can fairly get the good of it, that people's patience fails them, and they give the thing up as insoluble; though truly, it ought to be the current of common thought, like Saladin's talisman dipped in clear water, not soluble altogether but making the element medicinal."

In the humbler type of Italian mind Browning had, however, little interest; and a Catholic, writing after his death, wonders that "a man of his intelligence and inquisitiveness could have lived his days without ever noticing the flowers of Catholic piety that must have bloomed in every village in Italy." Pippa is the only character he has drawn in which simplicity and faith are conspicuous, and give the impression of religious purity.

In just one of his "important" later poems, if we may thus call the products of his greatest rather than his most successful effort, he touches modern Italy and the panorama of events unrolling itself under the windows of Casa Guidi.

The Prince of Hohenstiel-Schwangau claims connection with Italy because the Emperor Napoleon III., for whom the Prince is a rather clumsy symbol, was most vividly associated in the mind and life of Browning with Italy. By Browning's own profession, this tangled soliloquy was intended to be the *apologie* the Emperor, on the eve of Sedan, would have offered of

his twenty years of rule in France and attempted influence over the fortunes of Europe.

As an argument it is extremely interesting, but the reader of to-day, who already stands a little detached from the history of the century's middle years, is likely to get from it more light on the mind of the poet than on that of the Nineteenth-Century Cæsar. An imagination so fertile and nimble, so pliant and penetrating, and yet so erratic as Browning's found fascinating exercise in seeking to realise the aspirations of a mind so obscure, contradictory, and elusive as that of Louis Napoleon.

The task was undertaken while the spell of deep excitement attending the appalling collapse of the Empire under the fierce, long-prepared onset of Prussia rested upon the poet. It is the more remarkable that at this moment he sought the key to the Emperor's picture of his own mind chiefly in the dreams or professed dreams of the exile of Leicester Square and the prisoner of the fortress of Ham. In applying this key, it was almost necessary to ignore the means by which power was got and retained, and particularly the all-pervading, systematic corruption which made the sway of Imperialism irresistible in France, but so rattled the Empire that it was shattered like a hollow shell at the first impact of solid Germany.

This sacrifice of essential and controlling fact to the unity of conception is especially noteworthy in Browning, whom the blighting immorality of the Empire could hardly have escaped and must have

incensed. The sacrifice once made, however, nothing could be more ingenious than the development of the remaining theme. It is, of course, much too ingenious, for the characteristic of Napoleon's mind as it manifested itself in the early years, was vagueness rather than complexity, while its subtlety and elusiveness were rather those of calculated sophistry than of overrefined analysis. The sick and failing Emperor, at the moment chosen by Browning, contemplating dubiously, in the shadow of the coming gloom, the rise of the republican spirit in France and the swift gathering strength of his born foe beyond the Rhine, would have made an explanation of his career much less intricate and more plausible than the poet constructed for him. And, as we have suggested, it is the poet, not the imperial adventurer, whose mind is revealed in the Prince of Hohenstiel-Schwangau. The revelation, if one has the patience to master it so far as may be — which is far from completely—repays the effort. It must be got from the poem as a whole, and cannot here even be indicated, but the few following lines will show the romantic common-sense of the poet inspiring the lips of the Prince :

> Such is the reason why I acquiesced
> In doing what seemed best for me to do,
> So as to please myself on the great scale,
> Having regard to immortality
> No less than life—did that which head and heart
> Prescribed my hand, in measure with its means
> Of doing—used my special stock of power,

Not from the aforesaid head and heart alone,
But every sort of helpful circumstance,
Some problematic and some nondescript :
All regulated by the single care
I' the last resort—that I made throughly serve
The when and how, toiled where was need, reposed
As resolutely at the proper point,
Braved sorrow, courted joy, to just one end:
Namely, that just the creature I was bound
To be, I should become, nor thwart at all
God's purpose in creation. I conceive
No other duty possible to man,—
Highest mind, lowest mind, no other law
By which to judge life failure or success:
What folk call being saved or cast away.

Such was my rule of life : I worked my best
Subject to ultimate judgment, God's not man's.

Although Mrs. Browning had been dead eleven years when the poem was written, it was undoubtedly influenced by the memory of her enthusiasm for the man who once—whatever his other acts—intervened on behalf of Italy. Her feeling for the cause of freedom amounted to a passion, and two letters written in 1860 and 1861 to Mr. Tilton in America show not only her devotion to the cause of Italian unity but also the attitude she took toward American affairs, at the time as chaotic as those of Italy :

"July 20, (1860)
"Casa Guidi, Florence.

"Dear Sir : In acknowledging your liberality in $200 received through Mr. Francis, I send you other two new poems on Italian affairs with a certain reasonable shyness. Pray understand that I would not

for the world take advantage of your having perhaps overgenerously made a rash engagement with me.

"If these MSS., destined for a future edition of my Italian volume, should suit you, they are at your service; if not, let them pass simply into Mr. Francis's hands for the book. Do I tire you of Italy? Another time I may let you have poems of a more general interest. Only, here, it is hard for us to understand how anything can be of a more general interest than this subject. We are feeling keenly about the South. May God keep that hero, Garibaldi. His danger is less from the sword than from certain influences unfavourable to the national sentiment, and against which he should have steel in his brain. Divisions coming now (for the first time in this great movement!) would strengthen the separatists at Naples and turn to earnest what has been merely formal and official in the action of foreign diplomacy. When did Mazzini's finger ever touch Italy without a blot showing where? Mr. Francis hints that your people are not very Napoleonist. Neither am I in any partisan sense. My *Summing Up* is a bare statement. As for the Emperor, there will be a reaction in time, and meanwhile it would be a pity if abstract thinkers, such as you and I, should allow ourselves to be carried away in the panic and passions of Europe, from an estimate of the real position. The Emperor's far-sightedness in foreign policy produces a necessary disagreement with statesmen who did not see far, and his recognition of the rights of ma-

jorities and the nationalities, being perfectly understood by the retrograde parties at least, these build monstrous barricades of impossible calumnies for the arrest of progress and the confusion of the world. Will they succeed in their scheme of drumming up a coalition of the old governments against France? And, in that case, on whose side will go the peoples? Those are questions, but this is a fact, that at home the Pope's tyranny is maintained and abetted by French anti-imperialist parties as a means of opposition to the Emperor. 'Non his armis', you would say if you were a French protestor against the Government. Is France to stir a finger, do you think, to get these so-called liberals back to power? Believe in the instinct of nations.

"Elizabeth B. Browning."

"126 Via Felice,
"Rome [Early in 1861].

"My Dear Mr. Tilton: If you have had time under the pressure of your many thoughts at this crisis to think of me at all you may have wondered at the gap in my letters—but I have suffered great unhappiness and lost my usual power of occupying myself in consequence.

"Now I send you something—or nothing as you may decide—(three poems)—I don't insist on its being something—remember that. I have received *The Independents* very thankfully. It was by accident that I saw the *Garibaldi* stanzas in the anti-slavery paper first, and I should be quick to acknowledge

that the typographical faults were confined to it. You are very good in representing me with correctness, as in all the rest. My husband has drawn for the remittance belonging to the last two poems, *Garibaldi* and the *Summing Up*.

"Perhaps one of these days his sense of your generosity and appreciation of it as a peculiar expression of kind sentiment toward both of us may overcome his disinclination to the periodical channel. Never suppose that I have not done my best to send him to you in my stead—I know my place too well as poet, and my duty too well as your contributor. Shall I say that *Cornhill* and *The Atlantic Monthly* have hitherto solicited him in vain? But I don't give up hope.

"I thank you very much for your most interesting letter on American affairs. I go with your party entirely. The Constitution could only be rectified from within, unless you attacked it from without with guns, and I think Garrison eschewed the latter mode. He would use neither Congress nor sword. Now the question is thrown into new possibilities of solution by that fine madness of the South, which is God's gift to the world in these latter days in order to the restitution of all things and the re-constitution everywhere of political justice and national right.

"See how it has been in Italy! If Austria had not madly invaded Piedmont in 1859, France could not have fought. If the Pope had not been madly obstinate in rejecting the reforms pressed on him by

France, he must have been sustained as a temporal ruler. If the King of Naples had not madly refused to accept the overtures of Piedmont toward an alliance in free government and Italian independence, we should have had to wait for Italian unity. So with the rulers of Tuscany, Modena, etc. Everybody was mad at the right moment. I thank God for it. 'Mais, mon cher,' said Napoleon to the Tuscan ex-Grand Duke, weeping before him as a suppliant, 'vous étiez à Solferino.' That act of pure madness settled the Duke's claims upon Tuscany. And looking yearningly to our poor Venetia (to say nothing of other suffering peoples beyond this peninsula) my cry must still be: 'Give, Give! More madness, Lord!'

"The Pope has been madder than anybody, and for a much longer time, exactly because his case was complex and difficult, and because with Catholic Europe and the French clerical party (strengthened by M. Guizot and the whole French dynastic opposition, I wish them joy of their cause) drawn up on the Holy Father's side, the least touch of sanity would have saved him, to the immense injury of the Italian nation. As it is, we are at the beginning of the end. We see light at the end of the cavern. There 's a dark turning, indeed, about Venetia—but we won't hit our heads against the stalactites even there—and beyond we get out into a free, great, independent Italy. May God save us to the end!

"At this point the anxiety on American affairs can

take its full share of thought. My partiality for frenzies is not so absorbing, believe me, as to exclude very painful considerations on the dissolution of your great Union. But my serious fear has been and is, not for the dissolution of the body, but the death of the soul—not of a rupture of the States and civil war—but of reconciliation and peace at the expense of a deadly compromise of principle. Nothing will destroy the Republic but what corrupts its conscience and disturbs its fame—for the stain upon the honour must come off upon the flag. If, on the other hand, the North stands fast on the moral ground, no glory will be like your glory—your frontiers may diminish, but your essential greatness will increase, your foes may be of your own household, but your friends must be among all just and righteous men, whether in the body or out of the body. You are "compassed by a great cloud of witnesses," and can afford to risk anything except conscience. Ought not the North, for instance, to propose a pecuniary compromise, taxing itself for compensation to the South? What surprises me is that the slaves don't rise.

"Never imagine from anything said to you by Mr. Bayard Taylor, who remembers far too well a mere historical remark of mine upon the influence of government on art, that I am non-republican. I honour republicanism everywhere as an expression of the people, but it seems to me that a theoretical attachment to any form of government whatever is simply pedantry, as if one should insist on everybody's

wearing one kind of hat or adopting one attitude. A genuine government is simply the attitude of that special people. What we require for every man (or State) is life, health, muscular freedom to choose his own attitude. Let us be for the democracy and leave the rest. Who cares for the figure at the helm so long as the people's wind is in the sails? I care little. Only I do care that the democracy should have power—that each man should have the inheritance of a man and the right of voting where he is taxed. So this is my creed. . . .

"Napoleon will come out admirably in the Italian results. He has had Europe at the end of the diplomatical sword of fence and a European coalition against him as no remote contingency. Often what has seemed like opposition to our progress here has simply been putting on the drag down-hill when the wheel was inclined to a perilous velocity. But there are some who cannot understand, and more who will not. It will be enough that the Italian nation understands."

In these letters we have the actual spirit of the Italian poems. Browning's own attitude was much less pronounced. In the prefatory note to *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* in the Cambridge edition, a quotation is made from a letter to Miss Blagden that sums up his personal view.

"I am glad you have got my little book," he says, "and seen for yourself whether I make the best or the worst of the case. I think, in the main, he meant

to do what I say, and but for weakness—grown more apparent in his last years than formerly—would have done what I say he did not. I thought badly of him at the beginning of his career, *et pour cause:* better afterward on the strength of the promises he made and gave indications of intending to redeem. I think him very weak in the last miserable year. At his worst I prefer him to Thiers's best."

It is not, indeed, any single work or passage that connects Browning with Italy in the minds of those who care for his poems. It is the fact that he never wrote of any other country with so much of the feeling the Japanese have for the very trees and flowers of their land; the continual turning of his mind to Italian symbols, to impressions gained from the intricate web of her history, from the aspect of her houses, the smile of her women, the interests of her men, the paintings of her churches, the warmth and fulness of light in her streets and piazzas; and this long before he went there to live with his wife and long after he had left her Florentine grave to return to England.

Shortly before he died the fancy seized him to own some land in Asolo, the little town he "discovered" fifty years before on his first Italian visit, and he hit upon property belonging to the old castle which the municipality had previously refused to sell. The day the vote was taken authorising the purchase was the day of the poet's death, and on the same day the book *Asolando* was published.

The little old fortified city, "where the voices of Queen and Court are all stilled, where the silk mills no longer busily whir, and the pretty girls have ceased to go to and from their work," showed her gratitude toward the English poet in whose verse her name is countlessly mentioned by placing a mural tablet on the house he occcupied.

The municipality of Venice, also, placed on the outer wall of the vast Rezzonico Palace (the home of Browning's son) a tablet bearing this inscription :

A
ROBERTO BROWNING
MORTO IN QUESTO PALAZZO
IL 12 DICEMBRE 1889
VENEZIA
POSE

and in the right-hand corner his own lines —

"Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it 'Italy.'"

Then on the walls of Casa Guidi in Florence is the marble slab with its inscription by the Italian poet, Tommaseo —

QUI SCRISSE E MORÌ
ELISABETTA BARRETT BROWNING
CHE IN CUORE DI DONNA CONCILIAVA
SCIENZA DI DOTTO E SPIRITO DI POETA
E FECE DEL SUO VERSO AUREO ANELLO
FRA ITALIA E INGHILTERRA
PONE QUESTA LAPIDE
FIRENZE GRATA
1861

Thus in three towns of Italy the memory of the Brownings is preserved by a people as responsive as they themselves were to any form of genuine affection.

CHAPTER IX.

POEMS ON MUSIC AND PAINTING.

BROWNING has been called by some rash spirit the "Leonardo of the Nineteenth Century." It is only necessary to recall the true Leonardo,—anatomist, botanist, physiologist, sculptor, architect, musician, astronomer, chemist, geologist, geographer, engineer, and the painter of *Mona Lisa,* —to smile at a comparison that would certainly have moved the poet's laughter if not his scorn. Yet Browning's interest in all forms of intellectual activity, and his insatiable curiosity concerning the minds of men preoccupied with art and science, justify, in a way, the use of that tremendous name to indicate his humbler range.

In music and painting, at least, he is at home as in poetry,—or, possibly, the truer statement would be that he is a familiar guest in these neighbouring regions. Rossetti said of him that his knowledge of early Italian art was beyond that of anyone he ever met, and "encyclopædically beyond that of Ruskin himself"; and a writer in *Music* calls him

"the first of all English poets to truly and thoroughly recognise music for what it is."

Moreover, you do not read many pages of his without gaining some suggestion that he was personally intimate with the feelings a painter has toward his picture, and a musician toward his music, and his precision in handling the vocabulary of painters and musicians is undoubtedly due to his own exercise in their special crafts. When in Italy he studied modelling with Story, and Mrs. Browning comments somewhat plaintively in her letters on the "fury" with which he "rests" from poetry in making and destroying his portrait busts, and very doubtfully concludes that it may be better so. Such, certainly, was the case, for without that workman's knowledge, that actual subduing of the hand to the material employed, he could hardly have gained the sure, convincing note of his technical allusions, or that spirit of enthusiasm inspiring them which only personal memories of difficulties vanquished can arouse.

The uninstructed reader scores these technical allusions on the side of his "obscurity," but those to whom they are intelligible find in the man emphatic proof of his originality as a poet of self-expression. While, doubtless, another metaphor might be substituted for each one that he draws from either art, the mind would not in that case receive the same impression, would miss one aspect of the "lovely truth that careless angels know"; and be cheated

of one suggestion of the interplay of our faculties and aptitudes on which we found our imagination of a future with wider possibilities of development,—the secret hope of all of us. Hence the appropriateness of his excursions into technical language to his plan of seizing upon every opportunity open to him for making others see with his eyes and hear with his ears.

The teasing fascination for him of his side-exits from the permanent home of his own art is shown in innumerable passages of his poetry, and in *One Word More* he utters clearly the old cry for more worlds to conquer, with regretful recognition of its impotence. Raphael made a century of sonnets, Dante once prepared to paint an angel :

> What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture?
> This : no artist lives and loves, that longs not
> Once, and only once, and for one only
> (Ah, the prize !), to find his love a language
> Fit and fair and simple and sufficient—
> Using nature that 's an art to others,
> Not, this one time, art that 's turned his nature.
> Ay, of all the artists living, loving,
> None but would forego his proper dowry,—
> Does he paint? he fain would write a poem,—
> Does he write? he fain would paint a picture,
> Put to proof art alien to the artist's,
> Once, and only once, and for one only,
> Go to be the man and leave the artist,
> Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.
>
> I shall never, in the years remaining,
> Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,
> Make you music that should all-express me ;

So it seems : I stand on my attainment,
This of verse alone, one life allows me ;
Verse and nothing else have I to give you.
Other heights in other lives, God willing :
All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love !

It was, perhaps, his comprehension of the fundamental differences as well as the fundamental agreement between the various incarnations of the art spirit that kept Browning from trying primarily to make pictures and music of his poetry. He did not, certainly, lack the power to do so. Although even his lyrical poems are said to be with difficulty adapted to a musical setting, much of his poetry has a measure of melody.

"At all events," Mr. Burlingame says of him, what is called the "roughness" of his verse "is never the roughness that comes from mismanagement or disregard of the form chosen. He has an unerring ear for time and quantity ; and his subordination to the laws of his metre is extraordinary in its minuteness. Of ringing lines there are many ; of broadly sonorous or softly melodious ones but few ; and especially (if one chooses to go into details of technic) he seems curiously without that use of the broad vowels which underlies the melody of so many great passages of English poetry. Except in the one remarkable instance of *How We Carried the Good News from Ghent to Aix* there is little onomatopœia, and almost no note of the flute ; no 'moan of doves in immemorial elms' or 'lucent

sirops tinct with cinnamon.' On the other hand, in his management of metres like that of *Love among the Ruins,* for instance, he shows a different side; the pure lyrics in *Pippa Passes* and elsewhere sing themselves; and there are memorable cadences in some of the more meditative poems like *By the Fireside.*"[1]

Also, when he chooses to use words in the manner of the "nature-poets" he evokes charming images of outdoor scenes, as in these lines:

When the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half-asleep
Tinkle homeward through the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop;

or in the *Meeting at Night:*

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep;

or the lovely woodland pictures in *Pauline:*

Thou wilt remember one warm morn when winter
Crept aged from the earth, and spring's first breath
Blew soft from the moist hills; the blackthorn boughs
So dark in the bare wood, when glistening
In the sunshine were white with coming buds,
Like the bright side of a sorrow, and the banks
Had violets opening from sleeplike eyes.

And when he chooses to consider nature sub-

[1] See article in Browning Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature.*

jectively, he shows almost the force of Coleridge, and more than the sentiment of Tennyson. The effect of strange aspects of the outer visible world upon an excited imagination is hardly more vividly rendered in *The Ancient Mariner* than in *Childe Roland:*

——— What made those holes and rents
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to balk
All hope of greenness? 't is a brute must walk
Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.

As for the grass it grew as scant as hair
In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.
One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,
Stood stupefied, however he came there;
Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!

Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,
With that red, gaunt, and colloped neck a-strain
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
I never saw a brute I hated so;

And the larkspur and lily and rose in *Maud* are given no more exultant sympathy with the human mood than David finds on his homeward journey through the fields toward Bethlehem, when "the stars of night beat with emotion" until

Anon at the dawn, all that trouble had withered from earth—
Not so much but I saw it die out in the day's tender birth;
In the gathered intensity brought to the grey of the hills;
In the shuddering forests' held breath; in the sudden wind-thrills,
In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each with eye sidling still

Though averted with wonder and dread; in the birds stiff and chill
That rose heavily as I approached them, made stupid with awe;
E'en the serpent that slid away silent,—he felt the new law.
The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by the flowers;
The same worked in the heart of the cedar and moved the vine-bowers;
And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and low,
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—"E'en so, it is so!"

These examples, however, stand out in strong relief against the background of his usual method of treating the separate arts as infusible and poetry as the expression chiefly of the inner life. His poems on painting and music do not try to represent the impressions produced by these arts, as his poetry in general does not try to compete with them in producing such impressions. They represent, instead, the creative or critical spirit in painters and musicians, expressed in their own language, and by their individual turns of thought growing out of their special associations.

The three typical painters in the poems *Pictor Ignotus, Fra Lippo Lippi,* and *Andrea del Sarto,* show three aspects of the æsthetic impulse: the first belonging to "the season of Art's spring birth, so dim and dewy," the impulse by which the first monastic painters were stirred when they wept and prayed in adoration as they drew; the second, the simultaneous invasion of religion and art by the realistic spirit; the third, the ruinous tendency toward com-

promise, the effort to serve two masters, the sacrifice of sincerity to popularity. *Andrea del Sarto,* the poem in which this failure to fulfil the first duty of the artist is sympathetically shown, has been, curiously enough, the poem through which Browning's knowledge of art is most generally recognised. His sorrow for the fate by which Andrea was tied to academic excellence and denied the imaginative reach of faultier painters finds expression so mild and so tender, so permeated by the serenity of resignation, that, in its grave and sober charm, we forget the degradation of the type and how little truth to the essence of the artistic instinct there is in it. Dr. Berdoe has sketched the character of the painter, as he sees it in his poem, with vigorous scorn :

" ' Faultless but soulless ' is the verdict of art critics on Andrea's works. Why is this ? Mr. Browning's poem tells us in no hesitating phrase that the secret lay in the fact that Andrea was an immoral man, an infatuated man, passionately demanding love from a woman who had neither heart nor intellect, a wife for whom he sacrificed his soul and the highest interests of his art. He knew and loved Lucrezia while she was another man's wife ; he was content that she should also love other men when she was his. He robbed King Francis, his generous patron, that he might give the money to his unworthy spouse. He neglected his parents in their poverty and old age. Is there not in these facts the secret of his failure ? To Mr. Browning there is, and

his poem tells us why. But, it will be objected, many great geniuses have been immoral men. This is so, but we cannot argue the point here ; the poet's purpose is to show how in this particular case the evil seed bore fruit after its kind. The poem opens with the artist's attempts to bribe his wife by money to accord him a little semblance of love : he promises to paint that he may win gold for her. The keynote of the poem is struck in these opening words. It is evening, and Andrea is weary with his work, but he is never weary of praising Lucrezia's beauty ; sadly he owns that he is at best only a shareholder in his wife's affections, that even her pride in him is gone, that she neither understands nor cares to understand his art. He tells her that he can do easily and perfectly what at the bottom of his heart he wishes for, deep as that might be ; he could do what others agonise to do all their lives and fail in doing, yet he knows, for all that, there burns a truer light of God in them than in him. Their works drop groundward, though their souls have glimpses of heaven that are denied to him. He could have beaten Rafael had he possessed Rafael's soul ; for the Urbinate's technical skill, he takes a childish delight in showing, is inferior to his own ; and had his Lucrezia urged him, inspired him, to claim a seat by the side of Michelangelo and Rafael, he might for her sake have done it. He sees he is but a half-man working in an atmosphere of silver-grey. He had his chance at Fontainebleau ; there he sometimes

seemed to leave the ground, but he had a chain which dragged him down. Lucrezia called him. Not only for her did he forsake the higher art ambitions, but the common ground of honesty; he descended to cement his walls with the gold of King Francis which he had stolen, and for her. From dishonesty to connivance at his wife's infidelity is an easy step; and so, while in the act of expressing his remorse at his ingratitude to the King, we find him asking Lucrezia quite naturally, as a matter of ordinary occurrence:

> 'Must you go?
> That cousin here again? he waits outside?
> Must see you—you, and not with me?'

"Here we discover the secret of the soullessness; the fellow has the tailor in his blood, even though the artist is supreme at the fingers' ends. He is but a craftsman after all. Think of Fra Angelico painting his saints and angels on his knees, straining his eyes to catch the faintest glimpse of the heavenly radiance of Our Lady's purity and holiness, feeling that he failed, too dazzled by the brightness of Divine light to catch more than its shadow, and we shall know why there is soul in the great Dominican painter, and why there is none in the Sarto. Lucrezia, despicable as she was, was not the cause of her husband's failure. His marriage, his treatment of Francis, his allowing his parents to starve, to die of want, while he paid gaming debts for his wife's lover,—all

these things tell us what the man was. No woman ruined his soul ; he had no soul to ruin."

This description is admirable so far as it concerns the Andrea of Vasari's account; but the Andrea of the poem is a more poetic figure. The prevailing impression is certainly of sadness rather than of badness, and Browning was doubtless more concerned with the mood he was trying to portray than with the character and the lesson to be drawn from it. At all events the mood chosen offers us a glimpse of one side of Andrea's nature not shown to the world which despises him or to the wife who dishonours him ;—the corner of his being that still holds potentialities for greatness too feeble to push their way through circumstance against the antagonistic vices of temperament and character. He could hardly have seen the shortcomings of that "forthright craftsman's hand" of his without some light of inspiration by which he gains also a glimpse of the heaven of sincerity he has missed. The poem may be read as a moral lesson or as the delicate analysis of a regretful moment, according to the inclination of the reader, whose enjoyment is at all events not interrupted by any defects of workmanship, the perfection of the lines rivalling that of Andrea's own Madonnas.

In *Fra Lippo Lippi*, a poem seldom quoted in connection with Browning's interest in art, he touches hands with realism of the fiery, youthful, joyous type. There are few poems that come nearer to the painter's idea than this one, showing as it does the

passion for "the shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades, changes, surprises," by which the master of Botticelli was inspired. Here, much more than in the *Andrea del Sarto,* Browning displays his sympathy with the instinct for making portraits pure and simple of the visible world. Never mind soul, Lippi says to his Prior, that has nothing to do with painting; paint the flesh aright and count it crime to let a truth slip, and you 'll see what you will get:

> Say there 's beauty with no soul at all—
> (I never saw it—put the case the same—)
> If you get simple beauty and naught else,
> You get about the best thing God invents;
> That 's somewhat; and you 'll find the soul you have missed,
> Within yourself, when you return him thanks.

This is no less Browning than Lippi, at the moments when Browning is most an artist, when he cares least about his way of looking at things and most about the thing looked at, when he writes not with the idea of teaching any lesson or pointing any moral, but for the sheer love of a beautiful or interesting theme on which he can exercise his skill and ingenuity to his heart's content. Perhaps the fact that these pagan moments are rare with him makes them the more precious. Perhaps, also, the fact that they reveal, even more than his prayerful and didactic hours, his wholesome and impulsive nature, his abhorrence of insincerity and vulgarity, his liking for the brightest and richest, the most amusing and in-

teresting aspects of life, makes them seem to us to hold the finest distillation of his genius.

From Lippo Lippi back to *Pictor Ignotus* is a step that takes us across a deep though narrow gulf. With this sensitive cloistered figure painting rapturously among wan saints and thin virgins Browning has also a sense in common. He makes us feel, certainly, the delicate charm of the almost impalpable personality to which the world and the flesh are alien and one with the devil. There is a singularly pure flame of inspiration kept burning on such altars, and nothing can exceed the rapt serenity, the absolute emancipation from the material and physical world, of these Virgins, Babes, and Saints "with the same cold, calm, beautiful regard"; but to say with Dr. Berdoe that "the true art-spirit" exists only or even chiefly in such artists, working "for God and through God, not through men and for men," is to give a very general and imperfect impression.

The ideas that inspired these purely devotional paintings were not æsthetic in kind, but religious. The humility that keeps these painters in their cloisters, sacrificing to the known God, is a totally different thing from the immense curiosity of the painter who forgets himself in questioning nature and learning the secrets of her multitudinous effects. The spirit of retirement may belong to art or the spirit of audacious investigation. Angelico and Lippi are equally artists; but one is a religious man and one is not. To say that the religious man, who holds some-

thing higher in estimation than the visible, elusive truth, has more of the art-spirit than the agnostic whose humility consists of finding enough to wonder at, and try for, in the form and colour of created things, is to confuse separate and distinct sources of inspiration. Angelico and Lippi, then, are representative of two extremes of the art-spirit, Andrea lacking it most because, with the keener intelligence and the most instructed mind, he has the less sincerity.

That Browning could so clearly realise and define the qualities of sentiment and accomplishment by which each type is characterised proves him an interpreter infinitely to be prized. In these three poems alone he has added more novelty and variety to our impressions of human nature than many a lesser poet of "character" by the total sum of his work.

We find a similar grasp of the significance of different points of view in the four musical poems: *A Toccata of Galuppi's; Abt Vogler, after he has been Extemporising upon the Musical Instrument of his Invention; With Charles Avison,* and *Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha.* With the exception of Master Hugues, who is a purely imaginary character obviously named to rhyme with fugues, these musicians have also their historic prototypes, men who, following Browning's universal rule for his favourites, failed to gain a full amount of appreciation in the exercise of their art. Abt Vogler was a genius who somehow let fame slip through his nervous fingers;

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Galuppi was a prolific, versatile composer, "good alike at grave and gay," and especially good at toccatas or "touch pieces," which touch their theme lightly as the poem does, and in which "the interpolation of solemn chords and emotional phrases, inconsistent with their traditional character, may naturally, by force of contrast, lead to some suggestion or recognition of the jarring inequalities of life."[1] His operas, "though rich in melody, always written with taste, and never overloaded, none of them survived the revolution of Rossini, fatal to so many of Galuppi's contemporaries."

Avison was organist, critic, and composer, with little enough warmth from the divine fire in his soul.

These three represent three distinct types of artists, different not only from each other, but from each of the painters, Lippo, Angelico, and Andrea.

Galuppi represents the popular type, catering to a dancing public, yet with power and gravity enough to "make them leave off talking."

Abt Vogler represents the inspired type, losing the sense of the external world in expressing himself through sound or colour, feeling "the finger of God, the flash of the will that can" in his work.

Avison represents the learned type, cogitating and examining with a freedom quite uninterrupted by the creative impulse.

Through them all Browning teaches what is evid-

[1] See Mrs. Alexander Ireland's paper on "A Toccata of Galuppi's" in *London Browning Society Papers*, Part XI.

ently a profound conviction with him,—that music expresses feeling somewhat more truly than it can be expressed in any other way :

> God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear,
> The rest may reason and welcome ! 't is we musicians know,

says Abt Vogler, and Charles Avison states critically :

> There is no truer truth obtainable
> By man than comes from music ;

while life itself, "the very moral of life," is the fugue in complex and "mountainous" form.

Besides this general philosophy which might, indeed, have been educed by any imaginative mind, agile in metaphor, these poems contain a wealth of technical expressions such as not even Milton, with whom music was a passion second only to poetry, ventured ever to use. And into the dry dust of such phraseology Browning has breathed enough life to make it suggestive, if not completely revealing, to the Philistines as well as to the musician. Of course, none but a musician could get from *Master Hugues,* or from Galuppi's *Toccata*, the satisfaction that comes from meeting the familiar symbol of a labour delighted in, which is, after all, the source of much of our pleasure in technical expression. But only a very unimaginative mind could fail to follow with some degree of apprehension such a verse as this from *Abt Vogler :*

Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,
Sliding by semitones till I sink to the minor,—yes,
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep,
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found.
The C major of this life ; so now I will try to sleep,

or this from the *Toccata :*

Well, and it was graceful of them—they 'd break talk off and afford
—She to bite her mask's black velvet—he to finger on his sword
While you sat and played toccatas, stately at the clavichord.
What ? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something ? Those suspensions, those solutions, "must we die ?"
Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last ! we can but try !"
"Were you happy ?" "Yes,"—"And are you still as happy ?" "Yes, and you ?"
—"Then more kisses !"—Did *I* stop them when a million seemed so few ?
Hark the dominant's persistence till it must be answered too.
So an octave strikes the answer.

It is interesting for those disposed to dress themselves in a little brief authority to learn from the notes made by diligent commentators, how truly a musical composition such as Browning has imagined for Galuppi (or possibly played from his music),[1] would give the mournful effect of the poetry, suggesting the same melancholy contrast between the

[1] An American writer visiting the Casa Guidi in 1847 spoke of Mrs. Browning sitting under the trees or in the dusky convent chapel "while Robert Browning at the organ chased a fugue, or dreamed out upon the twilight keys a faint throbbing *toccata* of Galuppi."

butterfly gaiety of that delirious, beautiful Venice, and the ashen close of the irresponsible epoch in her history, when the dancing and the kisses turned to poverty and shame. Even without a line of explanation, however, the poem conveys its suggestion, which cannot truly be said of the description of the fugue in *Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha*. The latter appeals to the professional mind, and it is interesting to find Browning and Wagner at one about the fugue, Wagner using it but once, "and then to describe a street row."

Professor Pierce says in discussing the poem:

"*Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha* is a powerful and subtle discussion of the question whether an art-form may not become so highly developed and complicated that it ceases to be a medium for the expression of mood or emotion—art's true province. The old organist remaining alone in his loft after the service is over apostrophises the author of the fugue he has just played as a postlude. He has been trained in the strictest classical school, has studied and mastered religiously the severest polyphonic compositions. But now, as the last pedal-tone dies away, a long-fomenting doubt wells up in his soul and flows over—

Hist! but a word fair and soft,
  Forth and be judged, Master Hugues!
Answer the question I've put you so oft.
  What do you mean by your mountainous fugues?
See, we're alone in the loft.

"Then follows an original and witty description of a fugue which even in prose would do honour to a professional contrapuntist. . . . Finally the heresy breaks forth :

Friend, your fugue taxes the finger ;
  Learning it once who would lose it ?
Yet all the while a misgiving will linger,
  Truth 's golden o'er us although we refuse it—
Nature, though cobwebs we string her.

Hugues ! I advise *meâ pœnâ*
  (Counterpoint glares like a Gorgon)
Bid One, Two, Three, Four, Five clear the arena,
  Say the word, straight I unstop the full organ,
Blare out the mode Palestrina.

". . . If, as generally accepted, the highest Art be Art's most perfect concealment, then the poet's objections to the fugue are essentially valid. For in all music-literature—with the possible exception of some of Bach's masterpieces—the fugue-*form* is itself the ultimate aim of the composition rather than being a medium for the expression of anything ; its greatest claim to distinction lies in the development of contrapuntal niceties which are totally lost on even a musically trained auditor except he be himself acquainted with the piece rendered, and even in that case he is unable to appreciate those subtleties as keenly and fully from an audible performance as from a reading of the notes in his study-chair. For these reasons it certainly seems that, unless we modify or extend the now universally accepted de-

finition of Art, the fugue belongs outside Art's true province. At any rate Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha has been so far unable to answer his astute interrogator. Perhaps someone else may do so. The attempt would at least be interesting."[1]

Browning's one slip in technical phraseology, so far as the authoritative critics have indicated, lies in his comparison of evil to discords in music. In *Abt Vogler* he says :

Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized ?

"For a moment," his critic remarks, "he forgot to be a musician and used the terms discord and harmony in a general unspecialised sense," discords being as much a part of harmony in the technical sense as concords, and just as much to be prized.

Miss Ormerod's address before the London Browning Society on *Andrea del Sarto* and *Abt Vogler* gives the uninitiated a general idea of the significance to a musician of the musical terms used in *Abt Vogler,* although her own feeling is summed up in the words, "It is all there, and there is nothing to explain."

"It may be remembered," she says, "that the musical instrument of Abt Vogler's invention was probably his orchestrion, in which he embodied all the results of his simplification of organ systems, and by which he attained superior effects of tone and power, with fewer and shorter pipes. All this was

[1] *See* "Robert Browning as a Musician," *Music,* 1895.

founded on the theory of harmonics. The great advantage of his orchestrion lay in the fact of its being movable, and thus he could take his own instrument about with him on his concert tours.

"Having fixed his once imaginary instrument in a material form, we find him in the poem longing next to put his extemporisation into shape and form, but as ever before, 'the gone thing was to go.'

"I remember when a child hearing a lady ask an old, self-taught Yorkshire organist, 'What was that piece you played after service yesterday morning?' and the old man replied, 'Eh, mistress! if you was to ax me from mornin' till neet I couldn't play t' same piece over again, for it came straight out o' my 'ed!'

"So it is; an extemporisation is a passing thing; perhaps with some composers an occasional melody may come unsought, which lingers in the memory and may be reproduced at leisure; but the phantasy as a whole vanishes as a sunrise mist. It is considered dangerous for young musicians to indulge too freely in the delights of extemporisation; for in the study of music it may be analogous to day-dreaming in the study of literature, and Schumann warns students not to give themselves up too often to this faculty.

"We may suppose that Abt Vogler had carelessly struck a chord on his orchestrion, or possibly, as I before suggested, on his simplified organ at Darmstadt, and then all unexpectedly, as such impressions

always come, his soul was flooded with heavenly melodies and harmonies, and for a time he lost himself in the exquisite phantasy. When the ecstasy was passing he remembered the key in which he began to improvise,—

I feel for the common chord again

—and we may conclude that, as he wished to end in C major, it was the key in which he began. But he had wandered far away from the original key. It would be impossible in the limits of this paper to enter upon the subject of modulation as the musician slides by semitones, till he suddenly finds himself on a neighbouring minor, possibly E flat, he 'blunts it into a ninth' (a ninth from C would be D, one note above the octave); here he surveys for a moment the flight his fancy had taken, and the musical heights he so lately occupied.

Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,
The C major of this life; so now I will try to sleep.

"I was asked after my last paper to explain what 'C major' meant! I can only suggest that 'C major' is what may be called the natural scale, having no sharps or flats in its signature. 'A minor,' with A (a third below C) for its keynote, has the same signature, but sharps are introduced for the formation of correct intervals. Pauer says that minor keys are chosen for expressing 'intense seriousness,

soft melancholy, longing, sadness, and passionate grief'; whilst major keys with sharps and flats in their signatures are said to have distinctive qualities. Perhaps Browning chose 'C major' for the key, as the one most allied to matters of everyday life, including rest and sleep.

"Vogler's musical system was, as has been already remarked, based on the teachings of the harmonic scale. Hence the accusation of writing books on arithmetic rather than music! If you strike a note sharply on the piano, and hold it down, a series of scarcely audible sounds will be distinguished as arising from it. Speaking generally, first the octave is distinguished, then the fifth, then the keynote another octave higher, then the third, etc. Here then is the foundation on which all chords are built. The fifth and the third are intervals of which the common chord is formed.

"There must be some present who have heard in Handel's *Messiah* the fine bass solos, 'Why do the nations so furiously rage together?' and 'The trumpet shall sound,' or in *Judas Maccabeus*, 'Arm, arm, ye brave!' The opening notes of each of these solos are the notes of the common chord, the keynote with its major third, fifth, and octave treated as a melody; that is to say, as a sequence of sounds, following each other. Treated harmonically (that is to say, written above each other, and sounded simultaneously either by separate voices or on an instrument)—there is the common chord! There-

fore the common chord, as it is called, the keynote with the third and fifth, contains the rudiments of all music.

> And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
> That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.
> Consider it well, each tone of our scale in itself is naught ;
> It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said ;
> Give it to me to use ! I mix it with two in my thought,
> And, there ! ye have heard and seen, consider and bow the head ! "

It is curious that with Browning's familiarity with the forms of art and the actual struggle of the creative impulse to express itself through various resisting mediums, he should have paid so little attention to the important element of composition in his own art. Of compliance with certain great recognised laws underlying all artistic performance, obedience to which made Michelangelo's painting seem to Gounod like the music of the Sistine Chapel, he has less than any other equally gifted poet. It has been said of him that his art does not represent a scene but a gallery, and that the only unity it may have belongs not to his figures, but to his thought about them ; and the same may be said of many of his single poems. The qualities of order, repetition, balance, abstract form, are put into his compositions or left out at will. His aim often is not so much self-expression through artistic methods as self-expression by any method whatsoever, the result of which must necessarily be the defeat of the very

object desired. When in his eagerness to emphasise and impress his meaning he throws to the winds the real design, losing proportion, selection, structure, even the meaning is apt to escape the average reader and hardly repays the persistent student. Take such a passage as this from *Fifine at the Fair:*

I search but cannot see
What purpose serves the soul that strives, or world it tries
Conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories
Stay, one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own
Forever, by some mode whereby shall be made known
The gain of every life. Death reads the title clear—
What each soul for itself conquered from out things here;
Since, in the seeing soul, all worth lies, I assert,—
And naught i' the world, which, save for the soul that sees, inert
Was, is, and would be ever,—stuff for transmuting—null
And void until man's breath evoke the beautiful—
But, touched aright, prompt yields each particle its tongue
Of elemental flame,—no matter whence flame sprung,
From gums and spice, or else from straw and rottenness,
So long as soul has power to make them burn, express
What lights and warms henceforth, leaves only ash behind
Howe'er the chance; if soul be privileged to find
Food so soon, that by first snatch of eye, suck of breath,
It can absorb pure life; or rather, meeting death
I' the shape of ugliness, by fortunate recoil
So put on its resource, it finds therein a foil
For a new birth of life, the challenged soul's response
To ugliness and death,—creation for the nonce.

The philosophy is not difficult, however specious. It is the familiar contention that the soul may grow by evil as by good, its flame may feed on straw and rottenness as on gums and spices; but the mind is

so weary of the reiteration of the thought and the formlessness of the composition, that it actually lets go the idea in its efforts to grasp it—in other words, the idea moves about so restlessly in its fever of anxiety that it eludes the intelligence to which it is addressed. This is not nervous strength—it is more like St. Vitus's dance.

Another way in which Browning frequently defies the repose of artistic form is in the interruption of a large conception by accidental lesser thoughts. In contrasting the work of Millet with that of more ineffectual painters Mr. John La Farge writes:

"Compare the fateful look of one of Millet's figures, with the accidental haphazard appearance of a figure of what might be the same peasant doing the same thing, in the work of smaller artists—if indeed it be quite fair to compare them, because not seldom the weakness of observation runs through every detail of the painting of the smaller man.

"Not seldom the peasant himself, the subject of the picture, does not make his traditional gestures in a full and complete manner: as also, not seldom, does the animal (who is, however, yet nearer to the law of nature) step poorly, stand poorly, make a deficient equation. The reign of accident, of contradiction, runs into and interferes with the government of law which we are looking for. Notice how in the reflection of the world of sound by the art of music, the musician does not seek to represent its possible violations, its breaks of harmony."

Too often Browning's poetry has this "accidental, haphazard appearance," the reign of contradiction interfering sadly with the government of law. His thought is full of interruptions that sometimes spur the mind but oftener confuse it. If, like Landor, he had "weeded out and weeded out," and "carted off loads" of rejected lines, he need not have feared losing the originality to which he sacrificed much, for it is true, as has been suggested, that when he most nearly approaches the methods used by the masters of the past his personal view of life is clearest to us, and we get most adequately the charm and ardour and depth of his individual thought.

There is no poem of his that celebrates the austerity of art like that of Matthew Arnold on Giacapone di Todi, or that of Gautier at the end of his *Émaux et Camées,* yet where among his poems we find instances of such mingled restraint and flexibility,—as in *The Lost Mistress* or *My Star,* for example,—we realise the perfection of execution he might have attained had he chosen always to present his gift in the manner of the Japanese—enclosed in a wrapping of priceless workmanship.

CHAPTER X.

LATER LIFE.

AFTER his wife's death in 1861 Browning went back to England to educate his son, stopping for a couple of months at St. Enogat in France "to get right again," before rearranging his scheme of living.

Although he died in Italy, he never again saw Florence, and he wrote to a friend "no more housekeeping for me, even with my family. I shall grow, still, I hope—but my root is taken and remains." His nature was too energetic, however, as well as too courageous to let him keep long aloof from men and women, and in spite of this decision we soon hear of him in his house at Warwick Crescent, occupied more or less strenuously with the boy's education, and becoming gradually drawn to the interests of a stimulating social life.

The first years were inevitably dreary, and although his poetry shows no great regard for beauty as an important element in his enjoyment of environment, Mrs. Orr declares that the change from the

loveliness of Florence to the ugliness of London had upon him a most depressing effect. So far as he could he made his house a model of the Casa Guidi. In the drawing-room were the same antique Italian furniture, the carved chairs and sofas covered with green velvet, the rare tapestries, and the marble busts by Story of himself, his wife, and their little boy.

Here he naturally plunged into work, but nothing new was published until *Dramatis Personæ* appeared in 1864. By this time he was "going about and showing himself to be alive," and his reputation was growing, especially among the young men of Oxford and Cambridge, who, to use his own words, "did not mind the conventionalities of ignoring one and seeing everything in another." There was never anyone more accessible to his fellows, or more to be depended upon for the impulse to give pleasure. He was "the proper friend-making, everywhere friend-finding soul."

Mr. Gosse says of him :

"The most part of men of genius look upon an unknown comer as certainly a bore, and probably an enemy, but to Robert Browning the whole world was full of vague possibilities of friendship. No one resented more keenly an unpleasant specimen of humanity, no one could snub more royally at need, no one was—certain premises being established—more ruthless in administering the *coup de grâce ;* but then his surprise gave weight to his indignation.

He had assumed a new acquaintance to be a good fellow, and behold! against all ordinary experience, he had turned out to be a bore or a sneak. Sudden, irreparable chastisement must fall on one who had proved the poet's optimism to be at fault."

Like many others, however, who possess the gift of frankness, he reserved his true reserve, and the free, generous manner with which he met the world covered a reticence much too deep to be paraded. Most of his friends appear to have reached a certain point of intimacy and there to have stopped. As he became more and more a man of the world, getting through countless social engagements with gayety, and ease, and simplicity, he lived consistently upon the surface, lightly interested in many things, and entirely ready to conclude them when the term of his years was completed.

Much of his effusiveness of manner seems to have come from intense physical nervousness, enhanced by the difficulty he found in remembering names and faces, a curious contrast to the ease with which he remembered everything else. "I am nervous to such a degree," he said of himself, "that I might fancy I could not enter a drawing-room, if I did not know from long experience that I can do it." A public speech was impossible to him. Only one is recorded and that one an example of clumsy brevity. It was made at the tercentenary of Edinburgh University in 1884, where he was present as a guest. The account of this occasion in the *Times* gives a

pleasant, unpretentious picture of his frank delight at the enthusiasm with which he was greeted :

"The students arrived early," the correspondent writes, "and packed themselves in their allotted space. During the hour or more of waiting they had voluntarily subjected themselves to, they were surprised and gratified to find that a neatly dressed old gentleman, with a snow-white head and beard, had from his place on the platform elected to spend the waiting hour with them. At first they assumed that the venerable visitor had made a mistake, and they laughed heartily but good-naturedly as they thought of the disappointment that was in store for him. But by and by, as it was seen that the old man was genuinely interested in the impromptu preliminary proceedings, and seemed unreservedly to participate in all the innocent fun in which the students indulged, a kindlier feeling was shown towards him, and the young men seemed to find pleasure in making efforts to afford entertainment for their appreciative listener and observer on the platform. By and by the whisper passed from bench to bench that the faultlessly attired, benignant-looking, white-haired visitor and observer was no other than Robert Browning; and the students, as if ashamed of the liberties they had been taking with him, relapsed into respectful, reverent silence, until one daring admirer burst out with a loud call, 'Three cheers for Browning!' Instantly the students, springing to their feet, responded to the call with stentorian

cheers; while the poet, flushing and embarrassed, yet evidently highly gratified, bowed his acknowledgments, and then turned to find a less conspicuous seat. Having selected his place of retreat, he was, however, amid the thundering plaudits of the students, conducted back to his old place, the master of ceremonies on the platform having apparently explained that all the seats were allotted, and no guest could change his place without causing confusion. The poet, however, soon recovered his composure as the places beside him became more occupied, sometimes chatting pleasantly with the gentlemen near him, at other times keeping time with his foot or hand to the students' songs, and every now and again acknowledging with unconcealed pleasure the friendly and affectionate cheers of his young admirers.

"All through the proceedings he continued the leading favourite. Speeches of exceptional interest, beauty, and power were delivered by Sir Stafford Northcote, Mr. Lowell, and others; but still the cry was for 'Browning,' and at last the poet rose to his feet. He said:

"'Gentlemen, the utter surprise with which this demonstration fills me, and the embarrassment consequent upon it, must be my excuse for not attempting to do more adequately what I am afraid would in any case be done by me most imperfectly. I am usually accused of my writings being unintelligible. Let me, for once, attempt to be intelligible indeed by saying that I feel thoroughly grateful to you for the

kindness which, not only on this occasion, but during the last two or three days, I have experienced. I shall consider this to the end of my life one of the proudest days I have spent. The recognition you have given me and all your kindness I shall never forget.'"

If he posed at all, he posed as being one of the common herd, without exclusiveness or pedantry or poetic sensibility, and nothing pleased him better than to furnish some absolutely simple explanation of a poem into which complicated allegory had been read. This fancy for avoiding the least touch of superiority in manner, the least hint that he was viewing his companions *de haut en bas,* led him into a certain superficiality of plainness at odds with his natural taste for the grotesque.

From Mr. Gosse again we get this vivid picture of his manner when he dared to be as peculiar as he was :

"His private conversation was a very different thing from his talk over the dinner-table or in a picture-gallery. It was a very much finer phenomenon, and one which tallied far better with the noble breadth of his genius. To a single listener with whom he was on familiar terms, the Browning of his own study was to the Browning of a dinner party as a tiger is to a domestic cat. In such conversation his natural strength came out. His talk assumed the volume and the tumult of a cascade. His voice rose to a shout, sank to a whisper, ran up and down the gamut of conversational melody. Those whom he

was expecting will never forget his welcome,—the loud trumpet-note from the other end of the passage, the talk already in full flood at a distance of twenty feet. Then, in his own study or drawing-room, what he loved was to capture the visitor in a low arm-chair's 'sofa-lap of leather,' and from a most unfair advantage of height to tyrannise, to walk around the victim, in front, behind, on this side, on that, weaving magic circles, now with gesticulating arms thrown high, now grovelling on the floor to find some reference in a folio, talking all the while, a redundant turmoil of thoughts, fancies, and reminiscences flowing from those generous lips. To think of it is to conjure up an image of intellectual vigour, armed at every point, but overflowing, none the less, with the geniality of strength."

It would be said of him that he was immensely natural, because he strove to be like other people, and to meet them on their own ground. In the light of his letters to Miss Barrett we see, however, that the imagination, which in his work was let loose among abnormal types of humanity, constantly worked within him, keeping him conscious of the prodigious strangeness of life, and occupied in thought with interrogation of its paradoxes and irregularities; a tendency of mind discreetly dissembled by him at his dinners and receptions. In his notes on the conversation of famous Englishmen, Mr. Smalley gave the general impression of his "company manner."

"Mr. Browning is not quite three years younger than Mr. Gladstone," he said, "and, like the statesman, the poet has the secret of perpetual youth. If you inquire in different companies you will hear different accounts of Mr. Browning as a talker. He is the opposite of Mr. Gladstone in this: that he allows his conversation to be influenced by the company. The statesman takes his own line across country. The poet will, now and then, amble through gates and wait for a lead over a gap in a hedge, and even go round by the public highway. He is capable of talking as long, and with as much energy, on that truly British subject, the weather, as the most unimaginative of Philistines. For his best talk he wants a fit audience. The audience may consist of only one, but the one must be appreciative. Other things being equal, he prefers, I fancy, more than one. . . . It depends upon his host or hostess or on their guest, in what character he appears. Their evening may be spent with Browning the poet, or with Browning the metaphysician, or with Browning the man of letters, of music, of art, or, finally, with Browning the man of the world. They have, however, at least one thing in common—these various Brownings: each of them is a remarkable talker. If you have the good luck to meet two of them, or even all of them, you may ponder a little over the problem of psychological identity."

In spite of this ability to change in accordance

with his surroundings, if Browning had been asked what trait he valued most highly he would probably have said sincerity; and it was certainly sincerity, not the impulse to flatter, that marked his attitude toward those about him, and prompted him to expressions of feeling much more ardent than the English race are prone to. This peculiarity, together with his intense admiration of genius in his fellow-craftsmen, is shown in the dedications of his work.

For *Colombe's Birthday,* he wrote:

> No one loves and honours Barry
> Cornwall more than
> Does Robert Browning,
> Who, having nothing better than this play to
> Give him in proof it,
> Must say so.

Balaustion's Adventure is dedicated to the Countess Cowper, and the inscription begins like a familiar letter:

"If I mention the simple truth, that this poem absolutely owes its existence to you,—who not only suggested, but imposed on me as a task what has proved the most delightful of May-month amusements,—I shall seem honest indeed, but hardly prudent; for how good and beautiful ought such a poem to be!"

And the finest of the dedications is that of the 1887 volume of *Selections* to the poet who is commonly called his "rival"—to

ALFRED TENNYSON

In poetry—illustrious and consummate,
In friendship—noble and sincere.

Still more characteristic is the following letter, written to Tennyson for his eightieth birthday :

"29 De Vere Gardens, W., August 5, 1889.

"My dear Tennyson,—To-morrow is your birthday—indeed a memorable one. Let me say I associate myself with the universal pride of our country in your glory, and in its hope that for many and many a year we may have your very self among us—secure that your poetry will be a wonder and delight to all those appointed to come after. And for my own part, let me further say, I have loved you dearly. May God bless you and yours !

"At no moment from the first to the last of my acquaintance with your works, or friendship with yourself, have I had any other feeling, expressed or kept silent, than this which an opportunity allows me to utter—that I am and ever shall be, my dear Tennyson, admiringly and affectionately yours,

"Robert Browning."

Perhaps his freedom from petty animosities and grudges is best seen, however, in his words about Macready, whose treatment of *The Blot in the 'Scutcheon* years before had ruined the play : "I found Macready as I left him—and happily after a long interval resumed him, so to speak—one of the most

admirable and, indeed, fascinating characters I have ever known, somewhat too sensitive for his own happiness, and much too impulsive for invariable consistency with his nobler moods."

This gentleness and leniency in judgment contrasts oddly with Browning's extraordinarily vigorous temperament and prodigious activity and vitality. Like Lowell he frequently seems "not to resemble himself" at all; the one Browning has such boundless confidence in mankind, such delicate intuitions, such sweetness of temper and boyishness of manner, such opulent enjoyment of the luxuries and graces of life; the other Browning so keen a sense of the coarseness and brutality in men's souls, so accurate a knowledge of insincerities and vulgarities, and such power of detestable expression when touched by rage, as the sonnet to Fitz Gerald most unhappily testifies.

In the *Life and Letters of Edward Fitz Gerald* this passage was discovered by Browning: "Mrs. Browning's death is rather a relief to me, I must say: no more Aurora Leighs, thank God! A woman of real genius, I know; but what is the upshot of it all! She and her sex had better mind the kitchen and the children, and perhaps the poor. Except in such things as little novels, leaving that which men do worse or not at all."

In the first heat of his anger Browning wrote and published the sonnet beginning:

I chanced upon a new book yesterday;

which has finally found a place in his collected works. He never more perfectly displayed the result of his long subserviency to colloquial expression. Both art and instinct played him false at this moment of indignant excitement; and the fact that not even his most sacred feelings were safe from his most profoundly awkward and vulgar diction, his "style" at its irritating worst, should prove at least that wilfulness was not at the root of his great defects. His sonnet has been so ardently discussed by some, and so significantly ignored by others, that an extract from one of his letters to Dr. Furnivall, disclosing his own point of view after reflection, is rather interesting:

"As to my own utterance after receiving unexpectedly an outrage," he says, "why, like all impulsive actions, once the impulse over, I believe I might preferably have left the thing to its proper contempt. But there was something too shocking in a man, whom my wife never even heard of, 'feeling relieved at her death, he must say'—and I too said what I must. The people who tell you 'his opinion was really on the woman question,' talk nonsense. He might have uttered any amount of impertinence about women's work in general, and that of my wife in particular, without getting a word out of me—but, 'to be relieved at the *death* which would stop the work, thank God!'"

Among the qualities that Browning shared with many other poets was a faculty of forming strong

friendships with women. They sustained him during his worst weather, and brought out through his letters the keen susceptibility and undercurrent of melancholy kept out of sight in his intercourse with men. For his wife's sister, Miss Arabel Barrett, he had a warm affection, and her feeling for him was certainly very different from that manifested by her brother in his recently published letters. The poem, *La Saisiaz,* in which his deepest reflections on the possible future found direct and full expression, is that inspired by the death of Anne Egerton Smith, who seems to have been truly an intellectual comrade for him. The pale image of her qualities suggested by the allusions in the poem is singularly attractive. She had been his chief companion and sympathiser in his musical interests, and we learn from Mrs. Orr's biography that his passion for music lapsed into absolute quiescence after her death. The poem itself, however, is an example of the detachment that marked him during his later life. The note of lamentation is hardly heard in it and the pathos of the subject is but faintly suggested.

After the death of his father in 1866, his sister, the "Sarianna" of Mrs. Browning's letters, came to live with him, and her devotion to him for the remaining three-and-twenty years of his life finds its parallel in that of Dorothy Wordsworth to her somewhat more difficult brother. Browning perhaps could never have written of her as Wordsworth of Dorothy :

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears,
And humble cares and delicate fears,
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears,
And love and faith and joy—

At all events he never did write of her in any way, it being no part of his plan to unfold his domestic life in verse ; but he obviously depended upon her for the solicitous affection and consideration without which a being of his temperament must genuinely have suffered.

Together they made the summer journeys necessary to his health to Brittany, to Normandy, to the Salève district, and finally, after an absence of many years, back to Italy, to Asolo and Venice.

Brittany, in particular, furnished him with matter for his poems. The "land of beautiful churches, of poetic traditions, sanctuary of the legend, cradle of the Druids, still celebrates the brave deeds of her heroes and her saints. She still sings the old songs to her little ones. Her young men and maidens still dance the gavotte at the pardons. She has not yet lost her faith in her fairies. To her simple peasants the animals still talk on Christmas nights, and on the eve of St. Toussaint the dead walk in solemn procession through the fields. The table stands, has always stood, and always will stand by the one window, and the benches are on each side. The beggar is always welcomed, and at weddings the custom still holds for the bride to dance with the

beggar for the sake of the good luck that is sure to result." [1]

From these scenes and legends he drew abundant inspiration. At Ste. Marie, near Pornic (already associated with his early poem, *Gold Hair*), he saw at the typical merry-making the gypsy who served as a model for his Fifine, and the poem he built about her audacious figure is filled with charming pictures of the lovely region, and with tales of Breton superstitions. Here also he wrote *James Lee's Wife,* sitting by the window of his cottage, with the little church, the fields, the few houses, and the sea within his range of vision, and "the good gigantic smile of the brown old earth" in cheerful evidence.

In 1886 he was in Le Croisic in lower Brittany, and there he wrote the stirring poem, *Hervé Riel,* the proceeds of which he sent to the Paris Relief Fund for the aid of the people after the siege. The way in which he came to choose for his hero the modest sailor who took as his reward a day's holiday with his wife, the Belle Aurore, is extremely characteristic. At San Malo he found the name of Duguay-Trouin everywhere. "A street and a quay bear his name, his statue stands in a public square, and his portrait is in the museum." To him was ascribed the glorious victory of the French fleet in 1692, but while Browning was in Croisic he made up his mind that the true hero was Hervé Riel of that place. He

[1] See article on "Browning's Summers in Brittany" in *The Century Magazine* for September, 1897.

searched the records of the admiralty and established the fact, then, having found another neglected name that properly belonged to immortality, he speedily wrote his poem in honour of it. The *Two Poets of Croisic* also is written in commemoration of two obscure citizens of the little town.

From 1866 until 1870 the Brownings went to St. Aubin, Normandy, where they had the companionship of M. Milsand, Browning's valued critic and still more valued friend, of whom he wrote:

> Talk to him for five minutes,
> Nonsense, sense, no matter what . . .
> There he stands, reads an English newspaper,
> Stock still, and now again upon the move
> Paces the beach, to taste the spring like you
> (Since both are human beings in God's eyes):
> That man will read you rightly head to foot.
> He knows more and loves better than the world
> That never heard his name and never may.
> What hinders that my heart relieve itself!
> "O friend! who makest warm my wintry world,
> And wise my heaven, if there we consort too."

The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country was written at St. Aubin and dedicated to Miss Thackeray, who was there at the time, and who suggested the evil name of the poem by her choice of *White Cotton Night-Cap Country* as the title of a story. Near the beginning of the poem is Browning's description of his cottage:

> That, just behind you, is mine own hired house:
> With right of pathway through the field in front,
> No prejudice to all its growth unsheaved
> Of emerald luzern bursting into blue.

Be sure I keep the path that hugs the wall,
Of mornings, as I pad from gate to gate!
Yon yellow—what if not wild mustard flower?

Here life was a mingling of rusticity pure and simple, and the best of cultivation. On Sundays the Brownings and the Milsands went to the little Protestant chapel with their neighbour, a young Huguenot peasant; in the mornings Browning paced the Norman beach with his Greek copy of Homer; if a luncheon was given to their friends he was ready to act as waiter; for the rest he had a quiet atmosphere in which to write and the stimulus of Milsand's original and eager mind.

Such summer wanderings as these he vastly preferred to the fashionable round of country-house visiting, although for a time we hear of him at places like Alton Towers and Beauclere Castle.

In the meantime his town life grew steadily more complicated, and he paid his price for his increasing popularity. He was nominated to the Rectorship of the University of Glasgow and to that of St. Andrews, the first Rector to be "chosen by the undivided suffrage of any Scottish University." These offices he declined. In 1879 he received the Cambridge degree of LL.D., and in 1882 the Oxford D.C.L., and in 1884 the LL.D. of the University of Edinburgh.

Not a university man himself, the life of the universities made a strong appeal to him, and his visits to Oxford and Cambridge were made with zest. When he took his degree at the former place, the

students marked his advent by lowering a red cotton night-cap upon his head. This levity was resented by one of his friends; but he himself took it in excellent part, assuring his advocate that the "harmless drolleries" of the young men were licensed by immemorial usage; and that once there was a regularly appointed jester "whose business it was to jibe and jeer at the honoured ones, by way of reminder that all human glories are merely gilded bubbles and must not be fancied metal."

The "gilded bubbles" that he most appreciated were those honours that are associated with genius, or with a high degree of cultivation; and at these he did not himself jibe or jeer. His period of hero-worship never entirely waned, and his reverence for poets who succeeded in impressing themselves upon their generation is indicated by his making his little boy touch Béranger as he passed him in the streets of Paris, that he might be able to say he had touched a great poet.

His appearance during the later years of his life was one of undiminished vitality; his noble grey head was set on a remarkably sturdy form, and his clear, keen eyes maintained their brightness. He had not the ruddy English complexion, but a colour that has been described as the tint of old ivory. His voice continued genial and ringing to the last.

His mental activity increased instead of diminishing, and during the decade between 1868, when *The Ring and the Book* was published, and 1879,

when *Dramatic Idyls* appeared, he wrote the seven long poems, *Balaustion's Adventure, Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau, Fifine at the Fair, Red Cotton Night-cap Country, Aristophanes' Apology, The Inn Album,* and *The Agamemnon of Æschylus,* besides the poems of the Pacchiarotto volume and *La Saisiaz.*

In his methods of work he became increasingly methodical. He wrote on an average so much a day, and his work was finished at the date he set for himself. In building up his plots he was rapid and definite. The story of *The Inn Album* was decided upon and constructed in a single morning, to be carried out precisely as it was planned; and many anecdotes are told of him showing how vividly and instantly the scheme of his poem, long or short, sprang up in his mind.

Once, having told the story of a young artist who, disappointed at failing to receive a prize for which he had competed, broke his ivories and burned his brushes, and forswore his art forever, he suddenly realised the poetic possibilities of the circumstances and immediately blocked out a poem, suggesting finally the "non-obvious or inverted moral of the whole, in which the act of spirited defiance was shown to be, really, an act of tame renunciation, the poverty of the artist's spirit being proved in his eagerness to snatch, even though it were by honest merit, a benefit simply material." He said he had never thought of the subject before as appropriate to a poem, but "he left it, in five

minutes, needing nothing but the mere outward crust of the versification."

His manuscript showed few corrections, and twenty or thirty lines a day seemed to him a good rate of production.

His habit was to rise early and read or write before breakfast; after breakfast to give an hour to the newspapers, then to retire to his study for the remainder of the morning, much of which must have been occupied with his oppressive correspondence, as he never willingly wrote even a note after luncheon. Like Tennyson and Landor he was a great walker and preferred the crowded street to a park or suburb.

During the last ten years of his life he studied Spanish and Hebrew, and few things he read with as much pleasure as an occasional chapter in the Old Testament. Biography he read with avidity, and he liked French novels, those of Balzac in particular. English novels were the objects of his special detestation. His splendid eyesight served him to the last, and to the last he abused it with calm disregard of consequences, reading old books and faded manuscripts in the perilous half-light of late afternoon.

In 1887 he was moved by a curious impulse to begin life over again at the age of seventy-five. For nearly a quarter of a century he had lived in Warwick Crescent, chafing more or less at the disadvantages of the house and situation, and failing

to perceive any opportunity for change. Then, two years before his death, he fixed upon De Vere Gardens as a suitable location, and began to furnish his new home with antiquities which for years he had been storing away for the purpose. He put the final touch to the decoration of the rooms just before he left London for the last time; but his library was never entirely arranged.

About this time, also, he began revising an edition of his poetry issued in monthly volumes; and *Pauline* especially came under his reforming hand, after an interval of more than fifty years.

He went to Italy in 1888, and again in 1889, stopping the second time at Asolo,[1] where he found the

[1] The following letter, quoted by Mr. Curtis, gives an admirable picture of Asolo as Browning found it in 1889:

(From *The Easy Chair,* by G. W. Curtis. Copyright, 1891, by Harper & Brothers.)

"I have bought in ancient Asolo a narrow, tall tower into which, in this last century (very early) a house was built, and this curious place I have selected for villeggiatura when the scirocco is too strong in Venice for health or comfort. It was here that Browning, fifty years ago, was inspired to write *Sordello* and *Pippa Passes,* so to me it has that charm added to many others. It is such a rough and out-of-the-way little place that you may only know it by name. There is no hotel, no railway, no factory, no sign of modern civilisation. It is on a hill which has an ancient, ruined fortress at the top, and was an old Roman settlement, with the usual Roman *mise-en-scène,* baths, amphitheatre, etc., in the days of Pliny, who somewhere mentions it.

"Near my tower, which is built in the ancient wall of the mediæval town, is the tower of Caterina Cornaro, and one sees from most of my windows, so high are they, the whole Marca Trevigiana, with its tragic and dramatic associations of the early Middle Ages; the Ecceline, the Azzi, the incessant wars in which towns were treated by the tyrants like shuttlecocks in the game of battledoor.

"Browning and his sister have been here for the last six weeks, and you may fancy how intensely the poet enjoys revisiting, after so many years, the scenes of his youthful inspirations. He was only twenty-five or six when he first discovered Asolo. . . . Few young people are so gay and cheerful as he and his dear old sister."

charm of his old associations surprisingly fresh and potent, in spite of the change in him from youth to age, from rose-coloured visions to clear seeing. Both charm and change are recognised in the *Prologue* to *Asolando:*

> How many a year, my Asolo,
> Since,—one step just from sea to land—
> I found you, loved, yet feared you so—
> For natural objects seemed to stand
> Palpably fire-clothed! No—
>
> No mastery of mine o'er these!
> Terror with beauty, like the Bush
> Burning but unconsumed. Bend knees,
> Drop eyes to earthward! Language? Tush!
> Silence, 't is awe decrees.
>
> And now? The lambent flame is—where?
> Lost from the naked world: earth, sky,
> Hill, vale, tree, flower,—Italia's rare
> O'er-running beauty crowds the eye—
> But flame? The Bush is bare.

At the end of October he joined his son in Venice, where the latter recently had established himself with his American wife in the Rezzonico Palace on the Grand Canal; the only large palace in Venice which had not been stripped of its statues, ceilings, and ornaments to fill the empty purses of impoverished owners.

In spite of the lateness of the season, Browning

Mr. Curtis withheld the name of the writer in publishing this letter, but it was possibly Mrs. Bronson, who, inspired by Browning's description of Asolo, bought a house built into the old city wall, and made this last visit of the poet to the picturesque but uncomfortable little town infinitely more agreeable than it could otherwise have been.

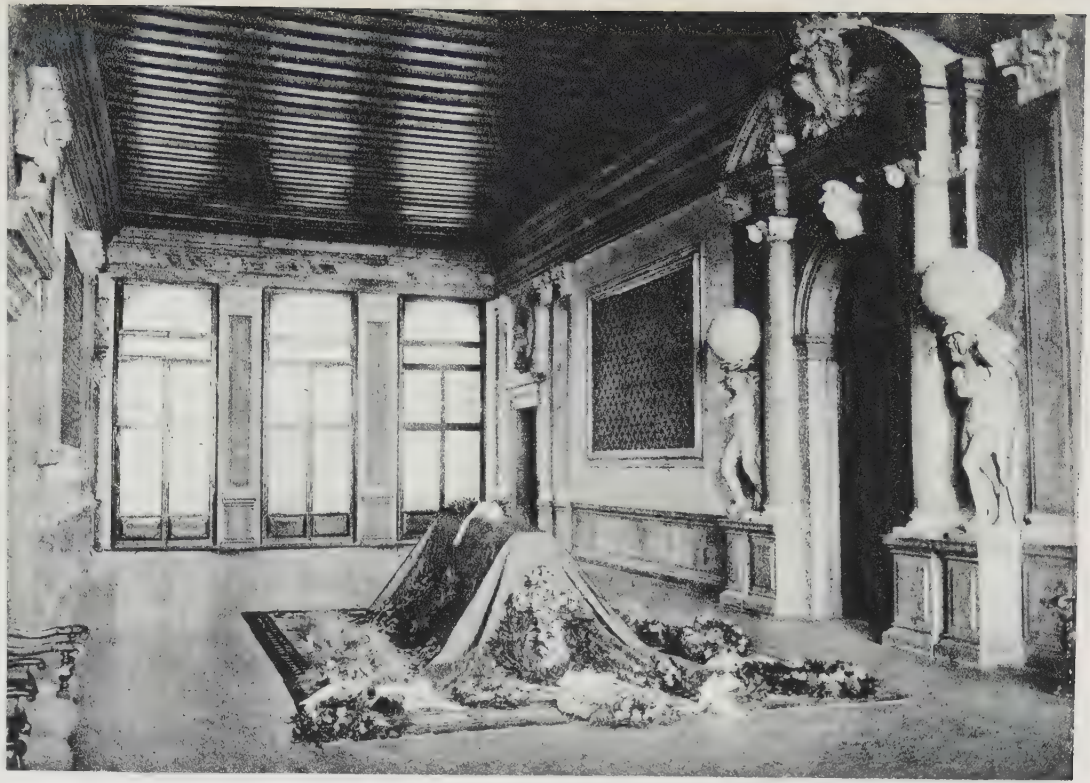
went every day in an open gondola to the Lido, where, walking in a chill fog, he took cold and quickly succumbed to the bronchial and asthmatic attack that followed, dying in the great palace on the twelfth of December, 1889. "Venice and winter, hand in deadly hand," destroyed him after his long stay in a world that had treated him upon the whole with generosity, and had been treated by him with loyal affection and comprehension.

George Meredith, whom he more resembled in the character of his genius than any other contemporary writer, wrote truly of him :

> Such ending is not Death : such living shows
> What wide illumination brightness sheds
> From one big heart—to conquer man's old foes :
> The coward, and the tyrant, and the force
> Of all those weedy monsters raising heads
> Where Song is murk from springs of turbid source.

He had himself desired to be buried by the side of his wife, should he die in Italy, but the British public loved him at last, and the wish of the nation that he might take his place in Westminster Abbey was deferred to. Thus he, who had always been so unassuming and plain, was carried on a richly decorated barge, bearing at the prow the figure of an angel, at the stern that of a lion, across the lagoons of the city to the island of St. Michael, and thence was taken to England, whose great memorial Abbey received him.

Although a heavy fog was over the city on the



day of his funeral services, a vast crowd gathered in his honour, young men and women forming a significant proportion of it.

The music chosen for the services was chiefly that which has been used in the Abbey at the burial of the illustrious dead for more than a century and a half; but the anthem following the lesson was composed by Dr. Bridge as a setting to the well-known words of Mrs. Browning:

What would we give to our beloved?
The hero's heart to be unmoved,
  The poet's star-tuned harp to sweep,
The patriot's voice to teach and rouse,
The monarch's crown to light the brows?
  "He giveth His belovèd sleep."

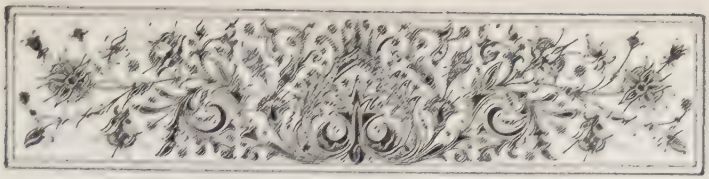
O earth, so full of dreary noises!
O men, with wailing in your voices!
  O delvèd gold, the wailers heap!
O strife, O curse, that o'er it fall!
God strikes a silence through you all,
  And "giveth His belovèd sleep."

His dews drop mutely on the hill,
His cloud above it saileth still,
  Though on its slopes men sow and reap;
More softly than the dew is shed,
Or cloud is floated overhead,
  "He giveth His belovèd sleep."

Browning was buried in front of Chaucer's tomb, near Dryden's monument, and after the committal the whole congregation joined the choir in singing Watts's familiar hymn: "O God, our help in ages past."

Thus the national reward of genius was finally extended to him of whom Swinburne wrote :

O spirit of man, what mystery moves in thee
That he might know not of in spirit, and see
The heart within the heart that seems to strive,
The life within the life that seems to be,
And hear through all thy storms that whirl and drive
The living sound of all men's souls alive.



CHAPTER XI.

OPINIONS OF CONTEMPORARIES.

TO the question, "Will his poetry live?" most of Browning's critics reply with little hesitation; but the range is wide from those who think no jot or tittle of his work shall pass away to those who claim permanence for only the comparatively few poems that leap with vitality. Mr. Birrell, recalling the work of his middle period,—that fortunate period when "for the first time and the last time" he deigned to "breathe through silver,"—declares that we "cannot think of him and the 'wormy bed' together. He is so unmistakably, deliciously alive." Perhaps no one thinking of his later poems,—of *The Ring and the Book*, of *Hohenstiel Schwangau*, of *The Inn Album*, of *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*,—would utter precisely this sentiment, although there are not lacking disciples who believe one or another of these the masterpiece.

Certainly after 1868 something had departed from his style that formerly had given it what Mr. James calls "that slight but needful thing—charm." The

qualities that correspond to light and warmth, the quickening influence of lines into which the reader plunges with something like the sensation of breasting a fine surf, are so far gone that the poetry of the later period, in comparison with the earlier, seems suddenly and unexpectedly struck with age.

Not that individual passages cannot be found to shame such a statement, but the power to write of pure emotion without first passing it through a bath of analytic consideration has perceptibly and permanently waned. Take this representative passage from *Red Cotton Night-cap Country,* in which two words of sufficiently obvious suggestion are discussed and accounted for in a dozen lines :

> He thought . . .
> (Suppose I should prefer "He said"?
> Along with every act—and speech is act—
> There go a multitude impalpable
> To ordinary human faculty,
> The thoughts which give the act significance.
> Who is a poet needs must apprehend
> Alike both speech and thoughts which prompt to speak.
> Part these and thought withdraws to poetry :
> Speech is reported in the newspaper.)
> He said, then, probably, no word at all,
> But thought as follows :

After a certain amount of this particularity of definition a reader of "ordinary human faculty" can hardly be blamed for repeating Hamlet's ejaculation to the player King, especially as the pains spent on such detail are denied to the parts of the poem that need clearing up, that impress the mind as

vaguely as a conversation between strangers about people and events entirely unfamiliar.

In a review of *The Inn Album* Mr. Henry James indicates with much precision the defects that grew upon Browning as he discarded more and more the rule Dryden formulated—that an author "is not to write all that he can, but only all that he ought." Mr. James says :

"The whole picture indefinably appeals to the imagination. There is something very curious about it and even arbitrary, and the reader wonders how it came, in the poet's mind, to take exactly that shape. It is very much as if he had worked backwards; had seen his dénouement first, as a mere picture—the two corpses in the inn-parlour, and the young man and his cousin confronted above them—and then had traced back the possible motives and sources. In looking for these Mr. Browning has of course encountered a vast number of deep discriminations and powerful touches of portraitures. He deals with human character as a chemist with his acids and alkalies, and while he mixes his coloured fluids in a way that surprises the profane, knows perfectly well what he is about. But there is too apt to be in his style that hiss and splutter and evil aroma which characterise the proceedings of the laboratory. The idea, with Mr. Browning, always tumbles out into the world in some grotesque hind-foremost manner ; it is like an unruly horse backing out of his stall, and stamping and plunging as he comes. His thought

knows no simple stage—at the very moment of its birth it is a terribly complicated affair. We frankly confess, at the risk of being accused of deplorable levity of mind, that we have found this want of clearness, of explanation, of continuity, of at least superficial verisimilitude, of the smooth, the easy, the agreeable, quite fatal to our enjoyment of *The Inn Album*. It is all too argumentative, too curious and recondite.

"The people talk too much in long set speeches, at a moment's notice, and the anomaly so common in Browning, that the talk of the women is even more rugged and insoluble than that of the men, is here greatly exaggerated. We are reading neither prose nor poetry ; it is too real for the ideal, and too ideal for the real."

In this last sentence we find the just complaint to be brought against all the long narrative poems of Browning's least felicitous and most productive decades. They are irritating as poetry because the element of beauty is entirely disregarded, and as prose because what might be an interesting story is smothered with verbiage. Yet, they are certainly no prosier than *The Excursion*, and no more fatiguing than *Paradise Regained*, each written in the decline of a great genius ; and it is somewhat amusing as well as suggestive to find Mr. Traill loyally attempting partially to shift the burden of Browning's more cumbersome and unimpassioned methods upon the Society bearing his name.

John Bull
Lord Brougham
A Pretty pack you've brought to
This Bill will pass — or else!
'Tis Revolution if you do —
Rebellion if you don't —

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"Those who knew him from the first," he says, "can never forget the name and work of Robert Browning, or doubt or misapprehend his place in their lives. It will never be again with them as though Browning had never been."

But he adds:

"Unless a poet and a psychologist are one and the same thing; unless profound and penetrating studies of human character, wise and noble reflection on human life, become poetry in right of their high matter, and independently, or even in defiance, of their imperfections of form; unless mere power stands for everything that goes to the making of poetry, and beauty for nothing—then must it, I submit, be acknowledged that too much of what Mr. Browning gave us during the last twenty years of his life could hardly be described as poetry at all. That all of it, or most of it, has been as acute, as subtle, as incisive, as forcible as the best of the poet's earlier work, may be readily admitted; but that it lacks the charm of expression, the distinction of manner which, when he chose to do so, he could impart to his poetic utterances, is a proposition which I imagine will hardly be denied. I am well aware that within a certain circle of his votaries it is deemed sufficient to insist—as indeed it can be insisted without fear of contradiction—that there has been no decline in the stimulating intellectual quality of Mr. Browning's work; and that he remained to the day of his death as great and as commanding a spiritual

teacher of his countrymen as ever. But surely these well-meaning but injudicious eulogists might perceive that praise of this particular description, be it as high as it may be, could never of itself avail to distinguish Robert Browning's position from that attained before him in point of time, and beside, if not above, him in point of place, by Thomas Carlyle. Yet, unless prose and poetry be one, what sort of claim to poetic supremacy would that be which has to be formulated in terms as justly and as completely applicable, word for word, to a great prose writer? I do not say, I am far from saying, that Mr. Browning's claim to poetic supremacy is only capable of such formulation; but I do say that this is the form which it most frequently takes among the school who have constituted themselves the authoritative expositors of his work and the chief guardians of his fame. And I say, further, that the fact of their doing so, and of their dwelling with as much enthusiasm on these later works, in which he shows himself the thinker only, as on the earlier ones, in which the presence of the poetry was no less conspicuous than the weightiness of the thought, has been mainly responsible for any decline of poetic quality which may have been visible in the work of his declining years.

"The nexus of cause and effect is, indeed, too plain to be missed. Upon a man of Mr. Browning's intellectual energy and fervour, upon a preacher so full of his message and so eager for its utterance, the

long-delayed experience which befell him when approaching his sixtieth year could hardly have failed to exercise a more or less disturbing effect. The situation in which he found himself when the appearance of *The Ring and the Book* at last made his poetry the literary vogue of the day was something like that of the great Parliamentary orator who sees the deserted benches of the House of Commons filling with noiseless rapidity as he rises to speak. It is a situation full no doubt of mental and emotional stimulus, but far more conducive to copiousness of production than to perfection of form. That it stimulated Mr. Browning's creative energies to the utmost, a survey of his writings during the period in question will convince anyone. If we leave out of account the longest of all his poems, the four volumes of *The Ring and the Book,* we shall find that the poems published in the last twenty years of his literary activity equal in bulk, and perhaps exceed in actual number of lines, the whole of the poetic production of the previous thirty-three years. For this, Mr. Browning, being human, had to pay the penalty. 'Art is long,' and the proverb, as I take it, refers not only to its acquisition but to its practice. Mr. Browning's poems suffered, and could not but suffer, from the fact that they were poured forth, fused and molten, as it were, from that magnificently heated brain, and presented to the public in the amorphous condition in which the mass had been cooled. It is possible that on some men a comparatively sudden

popularity of this kind might have produced a different, even an opposite effect, and that it would have lent energy to their perfective no less than to their productive impulses. But with Mr. Browning it was not so. We cannot exactly say, indeed, that the artistic spirit was wanting in him, or even that it was lower than the normal strength. On the contrary, it was, within the limits which he recognised and presented to himself, of extraordinary power. He worked on his peculiar line as a thorough artist, if ever man did; but the art which came naturally to him was not specifically that of the poet. He was not, he never had been, studious of the external beauty of poetic form. Had he been so, he must have run his pen through scores, through hundreds of lines which he has allowed to stand. Command over the beauty of external form was a faculty which he was slowly acquiring at the moment when popularity overtook him: and from that moment, or so I think it must appear to an impartial judgment, he ceased to strive after it. That he was a real poet in the sense of having written real poetry, will be admitted by every competent critic. But it will have, I fear, to be added that no poet so eminent as Mr. Browning has ever left behind him so large a body of brilliant, profound, inspiring literature, wherein the essential characteristics of poetry will be sought in vain."

Professor Alexander in his *Introduction to Robert Browning* reaches much the same conclusion without,

however, attributing the cause to any external influence. The books written since 1870 he calls "powerful works, great in their way," but doubts, if Browning had written nothing better, "whether in fifty years his poems would be regarded otherwise than as literary curiosities."

At the end of *The Ring and the Book* is introduced a justification of art used as a means of moral instruction, which seems in a way to mark the forming of a habit that presently took the place of more or less capricious impulse, and laid a certain fetter upon the free movement of Browning's inspiration, weighting it without giving it form: "Art, wherein man nowise speaks to man, only to mankind," he says,

> May tell a truth
> Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
> Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word,
> So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
> Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—
> So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
> Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived,—
> So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
> Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.

To tell a truth obliquely became increasingly his concern, at all events. After the *Dramatis Personæ,* we find nothing like *The Last Ride Together,* in which the delight of the moment, the keen zest of living and loving, have no lesson, but quicken the pulse; nothing like *Childe Roland,* in which fancy and thought move lightly and swiftly to the same goal; nothing to gallop breezily into the mind like the "Ride"

from Ghent to Aix and set the imagination tingling. The style of these poems, magnetic, forcible, and spontaneous, is lost; and, unlike Tennyson, Browning never recovered it. There is no poem of his old age that recalls for him, as *The Crossing of the Bar* for Tennyson, the most exquisite moment of his genius.

With *The Ring and the Book* those who love him best for the work that most equally combines his thought, his intensity of feeling, his individual manner, and the enchanting harmony possible to him, must confess that the glory has departed.

What remains are the intellectual and moral elements. At the end of his life, as at the beginning, he sees his subject in the souls and minds of men, only, as he says in the *Prologue* to *Asolando,* the flame of radiant illusion is gone, and the bush is bare, displaying countless intricate branches leading the vision in every direction.

And also he teaches at the end of his life the same ethical lesson taught at the beginning, the change consisting in the manner of presenting it, in a greater inclination toward paradox, a whimsical sophistry summoned from a vasty mind to be confuted by a keen moral sense. This tendency is recognised and defined by Professor Dowden as marking distinctly the period following *The Ring and the Book:*

"In the story of the Roman murder-case," he says, "the poet mingled fancy or falsehood with truth—not for falsehood's sake, but for the sake

of truth. The characteristic of Mr. Browning's later poetry is that it is for ever tasking falsehood to yield up fact, for ever (to employ imagery of his own) as a swimmer beating the treacherous water with the feet in order that the head may rise higher into pure air made for the spirit's breathing. Mr. Browning's genius unites an intellect which delights in the investigation of complex problems with a spiritual and moral nature which reveals itself in swift and simple solutions of those problems; it unites an analytic or discursive power supplied by the head with an intuitive power furnished by the heart or soul. Now in Mr. Browning's earlier poems his strong spiritual ardours and intuitions were the factors of his art which most decisively made their presence felt; impassioned truth often flashed upon the reader through no intervening and resisting medium. However the poet expended his force of intellect in following the moral casuistry of a Blougram, we felt where the truth lay. In *The Ring and the Book,* and in a far greater degree in some more recent poems, while the supreme authority resides in the spiritual intuitions or the passions of the heart, their momentary decisive work waits until a prolonged casuistry has accomplished its utmost; falsehood seems almost more needful to the poet than truth.

"And yet it is never actually so. Rather to the poet, as truth-seeker, it appeared a kind of cowardice to seek truth only where it might easily be

found: the strenuous hunter will track it through all winding ways of error. The masculine characters in Mr. Browning's poems are ordinarily made the exponents of his intellectual casuistry—a Hohenstiel-Schwangau, an Aristophanes; the female characters from Pippa and Polyxena to Pompilia and Balaustion are revealers to men of divine truth, which with them is either a celestial grace or a dictate of pure human passion. Eminent moments of life have the same interest for the poet now as formerly—moments when life, caught up out of the ways of custom and low levels of prudence, takes its guidance and inspiration from a sudden discovery of truth through some high ardour of the heart; therefore it does not seem much to him to task his ingenuity through almost all the pages of a lengthy book in creating a tangle and embroilment of evil and good, of truth and falsehood, in order that a shining moment at last may spring forward and do its work of severing absolutely and finally right from wrong, and shame from splendour. Thus Mr. Browning came more and more to throw himself into prolonged intellectual sympathy with characters toward whom his moral sense stood in ardent antagonism. We saw the errors of an idealist Aprile—they were easy to understand; let us now hear all that an Aristophanes, darkening the light that is in him, may have to say in his own behalf. We saw how the poetry of a Chiappano's life descended into ignoble prose. Let us now hear the self-defence of the prosaic life

of action; a life of compromise and expediency, from the lips of Hohenstiel-Schwangau. We saw the passionate fidelity of love in a Colombe, in a Norbert. Let us now hear all that a husband of Elvire can say to prove that he may fitly be on the track of a fizgig like Fifine. Mr. Browning's courageous adhesion to truth never deserts him; only, like that of Hugues,

> His fugue broadens and thickens,
> Greatens and deepens and lengthens,

until we are tempted at times to ask like the bewildered organist, 'But where is the music?' And there are one or two poems in which we wait in vain for any unstopping of the full-organ, any blare of the *mode Palestrina*. A strenuous acceptance of the world for the sake of things higher than worldly is enjoined by the first principles of Mr. Browning's way of thinking; the falsehoods of life must therefore be accepted, understood, and mastered for the sake of truth. His best gift to his age is however not intellectual casuistry. Better to us than his teaching of truth by falsehood is his teaching of truth as truth. Though in his recent poems he may linger long between 'turf' and 'towers,' carefully studying each, a moment usually comes of such terribly impassioned truth-seeking as that which proved the sanity of Leonce-Miranda. To approach the real world, to take it as it is and for what it is, yet at the same time to penetrate it with sudden spiritual fire, has been the aim of Mr. Browning's later poetry."

To the plain reader, as to these discerning critics, the flower of Browning's poetry seems to belong to the fifteen years spent in Italy before the death of his wife; not even the poems of *Asolando,* where he returns eager to "disport himself in the open air," to "amuse himself at random," having the abundant felicity of the early work.

It is interesting to note that when the *Pall Mall Gazette* asked its readers to send lists of the fifty short poems of his best suited for publication in the popular shilling volume issued after his death, only five poems on the prize list were written later than 1864, although one of the competitors took a dozen from the last volume of his work and declared that he had "never written anything better in lyrical quality."

With the *plébiscite* his entrance to the "plain public road" that leads to permanent fame is certainly not by the gateway of the poems in which form and emotion are sacrificed to psychological analysis. Mr. Stead is authority for the statement that he is being recognised "more and more as a people's poet": "workingmen and -women," he says, "in widely different parts of the land are showing an appreciation of his works which puts to shame the attitude of indifference or even disdain often assumed by members of the middle classes. These working folk are finding out the heart of love the poet had for the common people.

"They see how many of his best characters are drawn from the lower social grades. They feel the

sympathy which lingered over toilers like Theocrite the craftsman, Riel the pilot, Ivan the peasant, and the poor wrecks of humanity that crowd into the chapel in *Christmas Eve*. The heroine of *Pippa Passes* is but a lone mill girl ; and Browning's most perfect creation is no 'blameless king' or sceptred prig, but Pompilia, child of a parentage too low to name. His passion for popular freedom touches the popular heart in short poems like *The Italian in England, The Confessional,* and *The Patriot,* besides colouring the atmosphere of his larger works. It is possible that the masses may yet find in Pippa's morning hymn their plea for a juster distribution of wealth. 'All service ranks the same with God . . . there is no last nor first.' That is a principle which, when translated into economic terms, may be regarded as fairly drastic. Works like *Sordello* or *Bishop Blougram's Apology* will probably never attract more than a few to study and enjoy them. But there is range enough in Browning to supply ample food and fire for the new democracy."

As a rule, workingmen and -women have not been conspicuously fond of poetry about themselves, and Browning's appeal to them does not lie, perhaps, in his choice of humble characters (who are hardly more numerous than duchesses in his work) so much as in his sympathy with lusty emotions and instincts held by all human beings in common, and his entire freedom from intellectual condescension.

But his chief appeal is, after all, to minds as curious as his own concerning the psychologic mysteries of the human world. His passion for investigation is only matched by his daring in assuming discovery; and those who read him with a predetermined sympathy for these qualities find him keenly suggestive. In an article written just after his death, his stimulating quality is contrasted with Tennyson's satisfying charm, with full appreciation of his strong, inquisitive intellect, and the fitness to it of the form chosen by him.

"Here are contemporary poets of the selfsame country," the writer says, "both idealists in aim, both feeling the imperious necessity of not being too much of idealists to recognise fully the vulgarities, the dust, and, so to say, the lumber of life,—one of whom yet strives to give dignity where he can to all his visions, and either grace or ease where dignity is impossible; while the other almost strives to *avoid* giving any trace of an artistic manner or finish to anything that he has to say, nay, who makes it more familiar than is quite natural, by using such phrases as 'settled ὅτι's business,' or blurting out in his eager, shorthand style, 'put case,' without the definite article which would naturally, even in familiar dialogue, precede the word 'case,' and soften the hurry of his speech. The poet-laureate, in his boyish days at least, was so great a lover of graceful manner that his attitudes of speech often suggested posture-making. The vivid and graphic thinker whom we have

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just lost was so great a lover of the familiar that he invented angularities of style which no ordinary man could have discovered, and evidently preferred 'settling ὅτι's business' to explaining the principles which governed its use in the Greek syntax. And no doubt the former phrase is a great deal more awakening than the latter. Its very familiarity gives a shock to conventional habits of thought, and that is really at the bottom of Browning's love of familiarity and abruptness of style. He wants to turn versification into a spur rather than a pleasure. He oftener uses rhyme and rhythm to prick the drowsy mind than directly to exalt the commonplace mind. And no doubt the view that all verse should have a sweetness of its own had been overdone in modern times, before Browning arose to contradict it. The Virgilian use of verse is not the only use. The great Greek dramatists can hardly be said to have made 'charm' the chief feature of their versification. Many of their choruses are very rugged, and much of their dialogue is plain even to homeliness. Dante often abounds in crabbed speech, even, we suppose (for the present writer speaks only on the authority of others), where there is no doubt about the text. And even Goethe, lucid and harmonious as he loved to be, did not shrink from being jerky and obscure where his subject required it, as he evidently thought it did in his *Walpurgisnacht on the Brocken*. It is a mistake to suppose that verse has no function except that of lending harmony, beauty, and

grandeur to the thought. Sometimes, as in the case of Tennyson's *Northern Farmer,* rhythm only answers the purpose of a frame to isolate and give the impression of care, condensation, and study to a sketch of a very rough and coarse figure. Sometimes, as in the case of *Hudibras,* as well as with a great many of Browning's poems, the jerk and the jingle are as essential to the grotesque effect intended as want of proportion may be to an effective caricature. Indeed with poets who, like Tennyson, are great masters of both metre and rhyme, the rhythm of the finer blank verse is more satisfying, exactly because there is less exuberance of sweetness in it than in the most beautiful of the rhymed verses. The former has something of the dignity and simplicity of sculpture about it; the latter has too soft and luxurious an air for the most exalted themes. And for the same reason, in the Greek poetry, in which there was no such thing as rhyme, and, except in the Homeric hexameter, very little even of the silver rhythm of Virgil, we find a greater wealth of majesty than even poets of the highest order could have produced under the conditions of modern rhyme. It may well be questioned whether rhyme has not added too much sweetness to modern poetry, and made it, so to say, too 'sugary.' Are not Tennyson's greatest achievements effected without it, or in that modified rhyme of *In Memoriam,* where the distance between the two enclosing rhymes in the first and fourth lines keeps the

ear waiting long enough to prevent the full sweetness of rhyme from cloying the sense? Browning, however, uses rhyme with a very different object from poets in general,—not to add to the beauty or harmony of the effect, but to multiply surprises and shocks, to take your breath away, sometimes to flog you into alertness, sometimes to laugh you into confusion, sometimes again to make you laugh heartily at his humour. To use his own happy and latest phrase, he 'hitches the thing into verse' rather than expresses it in verse, because he loves the rhythmical movement and the cry it is capable of yielding. He often uses verse as a conjurer uses sleight-of-hand,—to astonish you with his ingenuity, with his resource, with his agility, with his presence of mind,—or as a tight-rope dancer uses the nimbleness and flexibility of his limbs. In a word, Browning does not aim at setting life to music, though music was so dear to him. To him, music was one thing, and poetry another; the greatest part of life, and that which he cared most to study, was quaint and odd rather than beautiful and sublime; and especially quaint and odd when you compared it with the spiritual ends for which Browning believed that man had been created. It was his great aim to show *how* quaint and odd life really is, how different from the standards of the eternal world, and yet how much influenced by those standards. He loved to make men see the strange irregularity, the astounding unevenness, the almost incredible failures, which

we are compelled to recognise in a world in which the hunger and thirst for nobler things are always breaking through ; and he thought he could do this better by using verse freely to familiarise to us the incongruities of the world as it is, than by using it to make the world—either as it is or as it should be—fascinating. To Browning life was a medley of grotesques with a glowing horizon beyond it. And he used his poetic ingenuity quite as much to help us enter into the grotesqueness as to help us see the sunlit distance."

It is this tremendous ingenuity that has so much impressed Browning's later public as to make him seem to them an "acrostic" writer. He himself tells a story of meeting a Chinese gentleman who was introduced to him as a "brother author." "I asked him," said Browning, "what sort of work his was ; and he replied that he composed enigmas. A brother indeed!" But most of the enigmas are comprehensible enough to a patient reader who is capable of concentrating his attention through many consecutive pages of unimpassioned analysis. The essential quality to bring to his poetry is, perhaps, a desire to understand it. *The Inn Album,* which to Mr. James was a stumbling-block, in spite of its striking resemblance to one or two of his own novels, has been a lucid and interesting narrative to Mr. Stedman, whose poetry is as clear as a New England brook ; and who has given in his *Victorian Poets* an admirable statement of Browning's temper of mind as it appears to a critic neither warm nor cold.

"To read one of Browning's psychical analyses is like consulting a watch that has a transparent glass, instead of a cap of gold, surmounting the interior," he says. "We forget the beauty and proportions of the jewelled timepiece, even in its office as a chronicler of time, and are absorbed by the intricate and dexterous, rather than artistic, display of the works within. Here is movement, here is the very soul of the thing, no doubt; but a watch of the kind that marks the time as if by some will and guerdon of its own is even more suggestive and often as satisfying to its possessor. All the more, Browning represents the introspective science of the new age. Regard one of his men or women, you detect not only the striking figure, the impassioned human speech and conduct, but, as if from some electric coil, so intense a light is shot beyond that every organ and integument are revealed. You see the blood in its secretest channels, the convolutions and gyrations of the molecular brain, —all the mechanism that obeys the impulse of the resultant personage.

"Attention is diverted from the entire creation to the functions of its parts. Events become of import chiefly for the events which promote them or which they imitate. Browning's genius has made this underworld a tributary of its domain. As a mind-reader, then, he is the most dramatic of poets. The fact that, after scrutinising his personages, he translates the thoughts of all into his own tongue may lessen their objective value, but those wonted to

the language find nothing better suited to their taste."

In a general survey of Browning's work we find it, then, consistent throughout with his first pre-occupation, the study of minds ; inspired by one ethical impulse, to preach discontent with low or tame ideals ; but changing steadily from poetry toward prose, as he became wiser, and more accurate, and less moved by emotion. In his preface to the translation of *The Agamemnon of Æschylus* a passage occurs that suggests his way of approaching the multitudinous facts of life as he grew older and more impressed by the difficulty of translating the actual into poetry.

"If, because of the immense fame of the following Tragedy, I wished to acquaint myself with it," he says, "and could only do so by the help of a translator, I should require him to be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language. The use of certain allowable constructions which, happening to be out of daily favour, are all the more appropriate to archaic workmanship, is no violence ; but I would be tolerant for once—in the case of so immensely famous an original—of even a clumsy attempt to furnish me with the very turn of each phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear : while, with respect to amplifications and embellishments,—anything rather than, with the good farmer, experience that most signal of mortifications, 'to gape for Æschylus and get Theognis.' . . . Further,—if I obtained a mere strict, bald version of

thing by thing, or at least word pregnant with thing, I should hardly look for an impossible transmission of the reputed magniloquence and sonority of the Greek ; and this with the less regret, inasmuch as there is abundant musicality elsewhere, but nowhere else than in his poem the ideas of the poet. And lastly, when presented with these ideas, I should expect the result to prove very hard reading indeed, if it were meant to resemble Æschylus."

In somewhat such a spirit and by somewhat such methods Browning has attempted to translate life, that most famous of all originals, and whoever is not "tolerant" of the attempt, must lose much of the very truth ; so hard by any means to capture.

Moreover, in making any estimate, however careful and sincere, of the comparative and ultimate value of his various work, it is a fearless mind, indeed, that permits itself to forget the words of another great poet concerning him :

> The shaft that slew
> Can slay not one of all the works we knew,
> Nor death discrown that many-laurelled head.

CHAPTER XII.

FRENCH CRITICISMS.

THE definition of criticism by which Matthew Arnold bound himself is this: "A disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world"; and in order to get anywhere near this standard, he said, every critic should try to possess one great literature, at least, besides his own, and the more unlike his own the better.

Such disinterested endeavour has certainly been shown by those French critics who, venturing into a language only a little less unlike their own than the German, have brought to the knowledge of their people such poets as Wordsworth and Tennyson and Browning. The last in particular must have taxed the flexible French intelligence and agreeable French urbanity to the utmost; yet no one of his own nationality has shown a more discriminating perception of the qualities and defects of his poetry, or so prompt an interest in analysing his method, as the writers who began, five years after the publication

of *Paracelsus,* to discuss him in the *Revues* while he was still without honour in his own country.

Perhaps it was not so much his transcendental ideas, and certainly it was not so much his overloaded style, that attracted them, as it was his intensely civilised mind, his profound interest in human development, his relish for personal idiosyncrasies, his mental alertness.

M. Philarète Chasles, writing in 1840 on the English theatre, went out of his way to include Browning among the dramatists, misinterpreting his intention, which was not at that time to write for the stage; but admirably describing the impression made by this new departure in dramatic writing on the French mind, keen for revolutionary tendencies.

"*Paracelsus* is the more worthy of note," says M. Chasles, "in that its merit has been almost unperceived in England. Seldom has a poet buried so much thought, brilliancy, pathos, and profundity in a work without a future, but not without power. As a dramatic essay it is very nothingness. Hardly out of its shell and quickly forgotten, drowned in vaguely æsthetic dissertations and the periphrases of a prolix style, the book should, nevertheless, be recognised as a very beautiful psychological and moral analysis.

"The author has desired to bring upon the stage one of the revolutionaries of science, and to interest the reader in the vicissitudes of his thought. The

character of Paracelsus was well chosen ; he represents a complete movement in civilisation. We sons of the nineteenth century are astonished at that taking place under our eyes ; at the beginning of the sixteenth one much more amazing was inaugurated, of which ours is but the development, and the impulse of which we are still following.

"Then were seen at one time Cardan, author of magnificent geometric formulas ; Copernicus, who, like Joshua, said to the sun, '*Stand still!*' Cornelius Agrippa, who in 1510 sustained the same argument as Jean-Jacques in 1750 ; Luther, Calvin, and Melanchthon. All the old authority was shaken by them. The revolutions of a new world were made upon a new axis. I cannot pardon Voltaire for despising Cardan and depreciating Luther. What was Voltaire, sower of doubt, beside those who boldly threw the first seed into European soil ?

"The most original of these strange characters was undoubtedly Paracelsus, who renewed medicine and created modern chemistry, the necromancer, sorcerer, alchemist, charlatan ; Paracelsus, who boasted of having found the philosopher's stone and the square of the circle, and who concealed a devil in the pommel of his sword. The ardour of science, the fever of knowledge, the need of glory, carried this fiery intelligence through every form of madness, through travel in every direction, through ridicule of every sort. It is Faust made real, hearing no other Mephistopheles than his passion and self-love,

surrounded by enemies, admirers, and envious rivals, full of scorn for this human species, so easily deceived, irritated to the point of frenzy by our inability to discover the secrets of life; an angel of light in the eyes of some, in the eyes of others a prince of darkness; in his own eyes an incomplete and impotent being; to history and the future an enigma.

"The beauty and difficulty of this analysis charmed Robert Browning's imagination. The mental drama which is enacted in all great and celebrated natures, and which takes on an aspect of frenetic beauty with such as Paracelsus, half sublime and half insane, has exercised an irresistible fascination over the young poet, whose intellect is evidently subtle and profound; he has attempted to make of it precisely the thing most opposed to the very nature of its subject and ideas—a play for the stage.

"There was never a stranger little book than his. Inheritor by direct descent from Wordsworth of the metaphysical dissection of ideas, from Goethe of plastic and external forms of poetry, and from Byron of scepticism, the author believes that of these elements, elsewhere precious, he can make a drama. There are scenes, indeed, and only one small thing is lacking to make the work dramatic, that is—drama.

"In the first act Paracelsus declares to his friends his wish to seek knowledge and glory at the peril of happiness. In the second act, having travelled far, he discovers that knowledge is not everything;

that it kills love, and that without the union of the two faculties, love and intellect, the human soul must languish and die. In the third act he returns to Europe, practises medicine at Basle, attains fame, augments his influence by mystifying his fellow-men, and, recoiling upon himself with more trouble of soul than before, recognises the wretchedness of the three ruins in his possession : incomplete knowledge, impotent love, false glory. In the fourth act he descends again from his sublime inspirations, seeks to forget his weariness and trial in worldly dissipations, finds some peace and hope in the common faith and in the abnegation of pride, and finally dies in the hospital of Salzburg.

"All this takes place among four persons ; or, rather, it consists of a monologue of two thousand lines, interrupted by a few incidental questions. Festus, a simple and devoted friend ; Michal, his wife ; Aprile, a young man as beautiful as Apollo and the symbol of poetry and the arts, only take up the thread of speech from time to time in order to give Paracelsus an occasion to plunge the scalpel into his own mind, to interrogate the immensity of his desires, the despair of his efforts, and the disdain inspired in him by his success and the admiration of human kind. Never did a drama venture on representation with such elements. No movement, no change, no catastrophe ; nothing but an eloquent elegy, following, in its tortuous course, the life of Paracelsus, as sun and cloud mark with light and

shadow the surface of the Rhine falling in sheets of bubbling water, disappearing under the rocks, or spreading out like a sparkling mirror.

"By a singular reversal of dramatic art no visible action is perceptible in this work. The external phenomena of passions and human characteristics are absent. They give place to the internal phenomenon of a mind which studies itself, and a soul that delves far into its own depths.

"We greet this strange result as the final limit of the metaphysical abuse so natural to the Northern muse. The drama of facile jugglery recently adopted in France, the drama of incident and passion carried so far by the Spanish toward the beginning of the seventeenth century occupy, opposite positions. Shakespeare leans, but not excessively, toward the metaphysical observation of the North; Calderon, on the contrary, sacrificing thought to action and colour, gravitates from another direction toward the central point and toward the perfection of art. As to the new author under discussion, a remarkable poet and philosopher, we cannot grant him to be a dramatist. . . . *Paracelsus,* a work which bears, as one examines it, all the marks of a superior mind, but which is disfigured by diffuseness, incoherence, vagueness of detail, and defective construction, is a drama only in name."

In 1852 the more sympathetic intelligence of M. Milsand interrogated the nature of Browning's ideas and his originality of expression, and produced a

series of criticisms that have not been surpassed, if indeed they have been equalled, in breadth of judgment and precision of definition, by any English critic who has discussed the same period of his poetry.

At that time M. Milsand's interest in English literature, English art, and English philosophy was at full tide, and Browning's poetry touched him at all these points. An Anglo-Saxon strain in his pedigree helped him to develop a style of thought and an accuracy of intuition in these studies that must have been impossible to a mind of wholly alien traditions. Moreover, his personal bias toward problems of the soul and unconventionality of temperament lent him comprehension of Browning's similar tendencies. The two writers became friends through a manifestation of delicacy on the part of the critic that was unusual, if not, as Browning impetuously declared, impossible to any but a Frenchman.

After alluding in an article upon Mrs. Browning to the tragedy of her brother's loss, it occurred to him that the reference might wound her, and he went at once to Browning, who was in Paris, offering to cut out the offending page should she desire. Thus began a friendship that lasted until Milsand's death in 1886, and was mutually fervent and valuable. For many years Browning sent his manuscripts to Milsand, not merely for criticism, but also for correction, acknowledging his "inestimable assistance" in large and small particulars, even that of

punctuation. "The fact is," he wrote to him in 1872, "in the case of a writer with my peculiarities and habits, somebody quite ignorant of what I may have meant to write, and only occupied with what is really written, ought to supervise the thing produced. And I never hoped or dreamed I should find such an intelligence as yours at my service. I won't attempt to thank you, dearest friend; but, simply in my own interest, do not undervalue your service to me—because in logical consequence the next step ought to be that you abate it or withdraw it."

The candour and fairness of M. Milsand's appreciation are clearly shown in the following extracts from a notice written in 1856:

"At the present moment public taste demands that poetry shall show us striking pictures; but it also demands that these pictures shall truly reflect the face of society, and disclose to many what only a few can distinguish for themselves. If our thoughts and characteristics could detach themselves and appear before us, and if we could see them as objects independent of our personality, it would be much better for us. That poetry seeks to render us an analogous service and to become in some sort the conscience of society; that the poet should express in his songs the feelings by which the souls of divers classes are stirred; that by his dramas he should show men the motives by which they are actuated, and the motives by which it is noble to abide; that he should apply himself in general to

first seizing upon the significance and import of things of the universe, their beauty and grandeur, in order later to try and reveal them through his creations : such, it seems to me, is the course laid out for poetry by the theory of the day.

. . . . . .

"I pause at one of the most remarkable representatives of this new phase—Mr. Browning. The word representative is not perhaps very appropriate to so profoundly individual a writer ; but whether as cause or as effect he is none the less connected with the dramatic tendency which I have tried to explain. . . . His characters are not so much images made in imitation of living models as natural combinations of all that his mind encloses, of what he knows or what he thinks. Everywhere is felt the presence of a peculiar organisation in which the imagination never sleeps, in which the mind has the curious faculty of giving birth to animated phantoms who display for him the spectacle of their acts. The result is that the creations of his brain appear at once real and dreamlike. It is the common truth projected into the region of the possible and the imaginable ; it is the universal tendency developed in a way possible to one individual only.

"I have sought to bring out what has most struck me in this poetry, which has so strongly impressed me. I believe I have left no doubt as to the worth of the man who has written it. As to the value of the work itself in so far as it is a

medium of communication between the author and his readers: as to the success with which it succeeds in making comprehensible to others that which he himself has conceived, and in making others feel what he has felt, it is permitted to judge differently.

"He has often been accused of a superabundance of asperities, reservations, and obscurities, of everywhere resisting the most conscientious efforts at comprehension, and of demanding generally a labour of mind that destroys his poetic effects. These reproaches have some foundation in fact, provided but one significance is attached to them; for to accuse Mr. Browning of intentional oddity would be an error. Far from being affected, his mistake lies rather in the direction of too great sincerity, too little calculation, too exclusive an endeavour to render precisely what he feels. In reality, Mr. Browning is a writer who spares himself no trouble, and also a great master in the art of forcing language to convey meanings to which it lends itself unwillingly; the painful as well as the admirable side of his art is especially due to that which he knows well how to give to his expression, the veritable imprint of his mind, and to the misfortune and happiness of his not having a mind like everyone else's. It is clear that his intellect sends messengers into regions little visited, and naturally his creations cannot fail to have something of the unusual about them. The intensity of his conception has also its disadvantages as well as its advantages. Thought

seizes him so violently as not always to give him freedom for considering the music of verse, for satisfying grammatical logic, for truly appreciating the effect of his words upon hearers who do not know in advance what he knows. Moreover, there is about him an indescribable brusqueness, a love of condensation which tends to make his poetry very compact and to fill it with abridged suggestions and unexpected allusions, all of which certainly is calculated to throw his audience off the track.

"On the other hand, many of these peculiarities constitute precisely the most beautiful qualities of his poetry; and among those which may rightly be called defects more than one seems inseparably joined to a tendency of mind by which alone he attains his merit.

"What remains, then, to charge against the author himself? Where are the faults he might have avoided? Where commence those of the reader who cannot understand him? Concerning this I avow myself incompetent to judge. I would only remark that to my mind a large proportion of Mr. Browning's obscurity comes from excessive dramatic movement. Besides plunging us without preparation into the midst of an event, he lets himself stray too often, perhaps, into the reproduction of the interruptions and irregularities of natural feelings.

"But these are very minute details in the criticism of a foreign author, and it seems to me more interesting to sum up in a few words the position

held by Mr. Browning in a literary epoch which, to the eyes of the future, will be not less remarkable, perhaps, than the renaissance of the sixteenth century.

"For about fifty years a most remarkable movement of ideas has taken place in England. For the first time in my knowledge, a civilised nation has become frightened by its civilisation, and has applied itself voluntarily to unlearning its skilfulness and adroitness in order that it might return to sincerity. Poets and painters, writers and critics, agree in holding in contempt the sorry knowledge that consists in recognising what a work may be and ought to be, and the sorry talent which consists in ability to fashion a well composed production. The entire nation, in a way, unites in thinking it a disgrace for a man, for a being responsible to God and to himself for his faculties, and capable of employing them in efforts toward the good and the true, to waste them in calculating the obligations that works of art should fulfil.

"Such a reaction against *art* certainly signifies much willingness of spirit, and England has found her recompense in becoming the school in which humanity has worked hardest, not in manufacturing constitutions and polishing up old things, but in working within itself, like the wine in the vat, to draw from its own depths new aptitudes, qualities, and organs. Without doubt the good has been mixed with evil ; and, as always happens, more than

one poor interpreter has been found to give to the present tendency a vulgar meaning. Thus, much has been said, and too much is still said, of clinging in poetry or in painting to the one truth, of limiting oneself humbly to the study of God's universe, and of bringing divine realities out into the light, leaving behind the little thoughts of our little brains. Nevertheless, these exclusive exaggerations have had little influence upon poetry, at least, and it is certain that up to the present time the tendency of the intellect has not been to limit it. In place of too literal imitation of reality it has interrogated the human soul; and, in becoming in turn the expression of moral sentiment, of passion, and of imaginative vision, it has only increased its domain.

"I should not venture to say, however, that I discern nothing of menace to the future of poetry, nothing which might, if exaggerated, become disastrous to her. Sincerity has its own perils: it may annihilate form, in the arrangement of the subject, and that is the direction in which I seem to see danger. In a word it seems to me that poetic literature is being strongly drawn toward something analogous to ancient Gothic art, and through the same causes.

"In the presence of one of our old Middle Age cathedrals it is not difficult to recognise a certain excess of detail or certain peculiarities which are more or less grotesque. Whence come these discordant elements?

"It is hardly possible to explain these deformities by love of ugliness; to confine oneself to saying that if the Gothic monument satisfies us less than a Greek temple, it is because the Gothic artists had less feeling for the beautiful than Athenian artists. The great single lines of the Middle Age façade attest a profound love of harmony in the artist who conceived it; and in attentively considering it more elements of beauty are quickly perceived than are necessary to a noble effect. If the cathedral, as it is, fails to give perfect satisfaction, it is because in addition to these elements it contains others of quite a different nature; because, among lines designed to produce a linear effect, details have slipped in which are literally alphabetical characters, veritable hieroglyphs whose business it is to express an idea.

"The façade taken altogether is like those pictures of the Middle Ages in which the painter has spoiled the pictorial effect of his people by putting into their mouths legends, and streamers on which their names or thoughts are inscribed. If I am not mistaken, this tendency belongs to a fundamental characteristic of the minds of Teutonic races, who, to some extent, are responsible for Gothic architecture. In Hogarth and in Albert Dürer, in nearly all German painters of ancient and modern times, we find the same characteristic, half symbolic, half artistic, the same complexity of intention, the same mingling of two opposing principles: of an active principle which tends to cause a sensation, and of a figurative or

linguistic principle which is addressed to the understanding and which seeks to interpret the feelings and thoughts of the painter himself. The artist is only half a workman; the effect produced upon others by his work, or rather the desire to produce a certain effect by his work, does not wholly absorb him; he keeps his individual sentiment, the activity of his faculties, and the need of expressing what he has felt and thought while exercising them.

"This inclination or potency of the Germanic character is precisely the force that seems to me to be now at work in English literature; dogmatism tends to occupy an important place beside the emotional qualities. Poetry has not on that account lost any of its inspiration; on the contrary, it has never been more imaginative, or fuller of a brave ecstasy; but it is less content merely to impress the reader, less content to be formed for that end alone: it seeks rather to express a great deal, and to reflect a great deal of what is passing in the mind of the poet.

"A strong aspiration toward expression is, in a word, what to my mind distinguishes the present epoch, and particularly Mr. Browning. His instinct draws him to the very opposite extreme from the Italians who, in order to keep poetry in its purity, have not feared to impoverish it. He would like to extend his domain until it included the entire sphere of human development. To think, to know, and to feel all that can be known, felt, and conceived; to retain for himself all this experience and to find means,

SKETCH BY ROBERT BROWNING THE ELDER

by a kind of continuous pressure, to reduce it to poetic pictures—this is in some sort the task he has set himself; and as a writer he might be said to limit himself to collecting, among the inspirations that come to him, those which make a finished chapter of this great résumé. I should not dare affirm that he has never passed the boundaries of that cadenced speech which together with thought makes music. Although he never ceases to be poetic, he falls short sometimes of harmonious composition. While all his poems are rich in emotional elements, they are not all of them calculated above everything else to produce emotion. Could he not remedy this disadvantage by giving more marked attention to the beauty of the general effect? I do not know. It seems to me that in his *Saul* and in many another poem, especially in the *Flight of the Duchess,* he has perfectly succeeded in giving to beauty of effect its full share of importance without in the least sacrificing his dramatic instincts or his ability to express himself. In any case, what there is perilous in his tendencies does not affect, or at least is not inevitably inherent in, his high and fine conception of poetry and the part it should play. The task he has imposed upon the muse may possibly be beyond her strength; the song, that is, which he asks her to sing may be too complex for the ear of the mind to hear without effort: but it is a song that is not outside her province; much more,—the work is one that she only can accomplish. In reality what Mr. Browning has

attempted is nothing other than the fusion of two styles of poetry in one. . . .

"Whether his writings are taken separately or in mass, they invariably give the impression of an ideal, a design which is never completely realised, which is hardly a decisive choice, but toward which lean all the thoughts and words of the poet. This ideal conceives a kind of poetry that shall serve to initiate, shall reveal the heart of things through their outer aspect; a poetry that shall transport from the depths of the mind the secrets and appearance of reality, that shall disclose all forms of the events that have taken place, all motives that have helped determine them, all forces that have presided over them, —and this in order that men may carry in their breasts the universal history, that they may themselves bear the universe with them, not merely the aspect of it but the explanation, its phenomena assigned their true pedigrees, that the eye of the intellect may perceive not only effects the causes of which are hidden, but may clearly see the very causes themselves."

After M. Milsand's death, the depth of Browning's affection and sorrow silenced him, and we have no *In Memoriam* to preserve the record of a friendship formed in the strong sentiment of middle life from many favourable elements. A letter from Browning to Dr. Furnivall expressed gratitude for a notice of Milsand that "thrilled him through." "You did all I could wish in the way of sobriety and succinctness," he said, "as well as adequate

recognition and handsome appreciation—adequate for the 'public'—who will never know what only an intimate of thirty-five years knows and never will attempt to put into words."

In 1870 a critic less persuaded by Browning's conviction of the uses of poetry—M. Louis Étienne—combats his proposition that art is the one way possible of speaking truth. He commences by accentuating Browning's derivation from Shelley, and finding the source of the former's originality in his devotion to the very different methods of the latter.

"When in painting," he says, "it is desired to find the family connection existing between the works of different hands, connoisseurs find historical evidence the least certain: from the drawing they can discern with more exactitude the school to which an artist belongs; the colour, that is to say, the manner in which each sees nature, reveals more obviously the lesson received by the disciple from the master. It is the same in poetry. More or less exact information and a preface added by Mr. Browning to some pretended letters of Shelley, justify belief in the predilections and affinities attaching the former to the latter. We prefer to trust to the form of his first works, to the way in which he composed his subject and grouped his characters.

"Whether he presented a philosophic idea by the aid of dialogues of slow solemnity as in *Paracelsus,* or whether he made of his hero, as in *Sordello,* a

pretext for developing a proposition in morality, he inherited undoubtedly from Shelley. The tone of the style furnished still more convincing proof: Mr. Browning spread over abstract material the same multiplicity of accumulated images, the same deadened colours, the same flaws and refinements, the same prolixity and lack of clearness—with this difference, that where Shelley was obscure, Mr. Browning was indefinite.

"Always, if the painter has any genius for his art, he finds in his very efforts at imitation the secret of his originality. While he constrains himself to follow his model faithfully, his nature gradually gains ascendancy; he mingles his own style with that of his master, and becomes in turn a master. The chalk becomes bolder in his fingers, and freeing itself from early servitude, follows a more liberal movement; it traces lines which already reveal the natural tendency of the hand, and a new form of design is found. Then the brush insists upon a particular tint; another tone dominates the work, and there is a different way of deepening or merging shadows: the hidden sentiment of the artist discloses itself in a colour which belongs to him. He is finally himself, original in spite of imitation. The poet proceeds in the same way. The path followed by Mr. Browning has been discovered by walking in Shelley's footsteps. From metaphysical poems under the appearance of dramas he has passed to the pure dramatic form, and the tone of his poems in

which the serious and the grotesque now jostle each other is not less changed than the design."

The development thus noted brings him to *The Ring and the Book,* in which a defined and expressed purpose takes the place of a broad general tendency, and this purpose is not easily tenable by a purely French imagination. M. Étienne explains it with zeal and patience in order to deny its value in poetry :

" A celebrated goldsmith of Rome, Castellani, has found a secret of making rings which excite the curiosity of foreigners ; he mixes with gold an alloy which, while giving the ring extreme thinness, permits it to be twisted in all directions and beaten into an infinite number of shapes of flowers and ornaments of marvellous delicacy. When the hammer and file have finished their work, a certain acid is used that causes the alloy to disappear : you then have a ring of pure gold, covered with fine ornamentation, and very light, as friable as the Etruscan jewelry discovered among the excavations, which falls to dust if carelessly touched.

" Mr. Browning has attempted to do for Pompilia's murder what the ingenious goldsmith does every day for his rings ; he has unearthed a book containing the documents of that old affair, and has thought that by mixing with them the alloy of his imagination he could make a dramatic poem in which his talent should expand over a quantity of animated and pathetic pages. Up to this point all goes well ; he is within his right, and he keeps his promise. The

poetic ring is finished, is brilliant, and the precious metal is not lacking; but the author believes he has attained pure gold—that is to say, reality. He gives to poetry the pretension of discerning the truth in a case where human judgment can but doubt, and he has undertaken to prove this general proposition by the instance of an antique trial. He deludes himself. Where is the acid that shall disengage from his work its element of poetic fiction? Had he found it, it must simply have annihilated his poem. When truth is to be sought the 'ring' must be laid aside for the 'book.'

"He may compare himself as he will to Doctor Faust calling up the dead, to the prophet Elisha restoring to life the son of the Shunammite, it is the task of the historian, not of the poet, painfully and scrupulously to discover truth among the cinders of the past. Is it indeed true that Pompilia was immaculate, Franceschini absolutely a monster, Caponsacchi impeccable, as he has represented them? Did everything take place as he is pleased to imagine? Is it credible, to consider but one other circumstance, that Pope Innocent XII. had the thoughts which he gives him upon the coming century and the generations yet unborn?

"He himself has created these people, and that after all is why they interest us. Certainly poetry cannot pass for the pure gold of truth; let us not confuse what nature has separated; let us fear lest, by asking more than it can give, we lose it.

"All those who pretend to make out of poetry pure criticism, pure morality, or pure religion, seem like careless travellers who buy the fragile ornaments we have just described, hastily pack them, and find them on their return nothing but a bit of powder in the bottom of the trunk.

"We have said that the idea of this general proposition sustained by Mr. Browning has doubtless added to the length of his poem. We cannot otherwise explain the multiplicity of versions which he presents of the same fact. In substituting his drama for the authentic and complete narrative, he must give speech to all the witnesses, all the orators or chief judges who figure in the suit. In spite of all the resources of wit, eloquence, satire, and humour by which he seeks to conceal the length and monotony, he has made of his poetic composition an interminable pile of legal documents. Length usually brings in its train carelessness of detail. Mr. Browning can no more escape this law than the racer in too extended a course can fail to lose the appearance of alertness and nimbleness. We do not advise opening his book with too fresh a recollection of Tennyson's verse, full of wise scholarship, and the facility of art. This degree of necessary perfection, which Mr. Browning has not, and in which a gigantic work cannot fail to be especially deficient, brings back our thought to the poet's beginnings. Shelley, who is much more correct, has written a page against the labour of style, the *limæ labor* of which the Latin poet

speaks. Mr. Browning belongs to the school which has profited more by the lesson than by the example of the master.

"After having surveyed the complete round of Mr. Browning's works we might be tempted to believe that he has returned to his point of departure,—that he has aimed in *The Ring and the Book* as in his *Paracelsus* at demonstrating a general proposition. On closer examination this resemblance disappears. A philosophical idea reigns in his early writings and so fills them that if it were discarded by the author nothing perceptible would remain. The characters are so penetrated by this idea that if it were suppressed they would have nothing left to say. Such is not the case with the poem which furnishes occasion for the present study. The thesis Mr. Browning has been pleased to add is independent of the actors among whom the different rôles are divided. Take away this general conception that poetry can reach historic truth better than witnesses, lawyers, judges, and history itself, the drama remains what it was—neither the passions nor the feelings nor the rôles have changed. The work has lost nothing; we have seen in fact that it would gain in rapidity. This conception is not the soul of the book; it is reduced to a theory that serves as preface—a very contestable theory and one that the author for the sake of his own success would do well to lay aside, as may be said of so many other prefaces.

"In place, then, of leading the poet back to his

starting-point, *The Ring and the Book* marks the distance he has travelled from it. Philosophic thought was not his true domain, any more than the theatre in which he multiplied his fruitless attempts, to which he brought too much individual psychology and too many moral analyses. He was moved to revive the men of the past, not to set them in action, but merely for the pleasure of seeing them breathe and take up life, feeling, and speech again.

"The theory we have just disputed is not an invention of afterthought. Mr. Browning must believe that the poet evokes the dead from their tomb like the witch of Endor; he must have persuaded himself that poetry is the school of history and criticism. This among his ideas is the supreme one, and it is unnecessary to show its exaggeration. It is difficult to sound the thought of those about us whom we see daily!

Tous les cœurs sont cachés, tout homme est un abîme.

How can we read with certainty the souls of men who are centuries dead? Poetry is not the precise instrument fit to unveil these mysteries, but it can do better things: it can create men and character. Mr. Browning has created Saul, Pompilia, a crowd of other true and living people; what more does his ambition demand?"

These notices, written before the rise of the earliest Browning society, are interesting not only for the impressions they record, but also as showing that

Browning was never really an obscure and unknown poet. His honey was first extracted by the lively bees of French and American criticism, and appreciation in his native circle came late ; but there was never a decade after 1840 when he was not recognised by the adjudicators of letters as a stimulating influence in literature.

CHAPTER XIII.

BROWNING SOCIETIES.

THE most remarkable phenomenon in Browning's history is one connected entirely with his literary life: the descent upon his work, that is, of a cloud of witnesses to its value and interest, who did for him in a more or less commonplace way what Ruskin did for Turner by the eloquent force of his immense appreciation.

In his *Victorian Poets* Mr. Stedman describes the event from a detached point of view.

"The sudden uprising of many Browning clubs is the latest symptom of the rage for elucidation," he says. "The like of it has not been witnessed since the days of the neo-Platonists and grammarians; nor were there a thousand printing-presses at the command of the Alexandrian scholiasts. Not only more than one University quadrangle, but every mercantile town, from London, where the poet dwells, to the farthest outpost of the Western continent, has its central Browning Society, from which dependents radiate like the little spiders that spin

their tiny strands near the maternal web. Emerson was a seer; Browning is a virile poet and scholar; but it has been the same with the followers of both. A Browning student of the first order can do much for us, while one of the third or fourth remove—whose degree is expressed algebraically as $B^{\frac{1}{n}}$ or $\sqrt[n]{B}$—may be and often is as prosaic a claimant to special illumination as one is apt to meet. The 'study' of Browning takes strong hold upon theorists, analysts, didacticians, who care little for poetry in itself, and who, like Chinese artists, pay more respect to the facial dimensions of his Muse than to her essential beauty and the divine light of her eyes. The master himself may well view with distrust certain phases of a movement originating with his more-favoured disciples; nor is poetry that requires annotation in its own time surer, on that account, of supremacy in the future. Perhaps the best that can be said of this matter is that something out of the common is needed to direct attention to a great original genius, and to secure for a poet, after his long experience of neglect, some practical return for the fruits of his imagination."

The first visible sign and portent of what has flippantly been called the "Browning craze" occurred in America in 1877, when Professor Corson started the Cornell Browning Club. Four years later the London Browning Society was inaugurated; in 1885 the present Boston Browning Society, and in 1888 the Browning Society of the New

Century Club of Philadelphia. In Cleveland, Ohio, a Browning Club was formed in the same year as the London Society, and in Baltimore, Chicago, and other American cities, as well as in Australia and Wales, societies have been organised. Some of these have passed briefly and brilliantly across the horizon ; others, notably the Boston and Philadelphia societies, have continued to give steady light and have made permanent additions to Browning literature. The admirable library of the Boston Society and the recent Camberwell edition of Browning's works, edited by two members of the Philadelphia Society, are examples of the practical results attained by them.

In addition to these more important organisations, a large number of satellites in the form of private "clubs," reading circles, and school "unions" have been discovered since Browning, almost half a century after the publication of his first poem, became an idol.

The range from the sublime to the ridiculous is conspicuous when the societies are regarded as a whole. Mr. Curtis once gave an account of an American club which decided to add secrecy to its other charms, and immediately gave a reception at which everything was brown : the brown tablecloth covered with brown china, brown bread, and brown sugar served with the refreshments ; the windows hung with brown curtains, and the hostesses dressed in brown. As must have been expected,

the American faculty for guessing was not severely taxed, and the club had the pleasure of publicity without the shame of open confession.

In America, in fact, the zeal of Browning's followers exceeded as well as preceded that of his English admirers.

The devotion of Levi Thaxter as "a missionary and pioneer" foreshadowed the interest from which the American societies grew; and it was through a review of *Bells and Pomegranates* written by Miss Fuller for the *Tribune* that the poet was introduced to the general public, about four years after the Boston edition of Tennyson had met with its enthusiastic reception.

In England, altogether the most interesting and suggestive of the minor societies is the one in Walworth, where the Congregational chapel, which the young Browning attended with his parents, is now converted into a hall bearing his name, the home of a settlement of working people, some of whom are said to read *Abt Vogler* and *Paracelsus* with avidity and discrimination. Mr. Stead, who has this settlement in charge, conceived the idea of instructing the Walworth children in Browning's life and poetry, as the children of Rydal and Grasmere are taught some knowledge and love of Wordsworth. After a year of Browning study the children made him and his poetry the subject of essays in a competition between the Walworth Board Schools, and the result showed rather sadly some of the defects of the average

literary society's qualities. The competitors made very clear the impression the poet's cheerfulness and energy had produced upon them; but the prize paper closed with the remarkable statement that Mrs. Browning wrote three volumes of poetry about her husband's death!

The peculiarity of most of these organisations has been their existence during the life of the poet who constitutes their reason for being; and this peculiarity has introduced a personal element into the feeling so ardently displayed for and against them. Dr. Furnivall, the founder of the London Society, surveyed the situation in a characteristic address to his fellow-members at the time of Browning's death. The following extract shows his point of view.

"Since our last meeting," he said, "we have suffered a terrible blow in the loss of the great poet in whose honour this Society was founded. It is not for me to say much of his character or the character of his work to-night. You have shown by your adhesion to the Society and your earnest study of him that you hold him to be one of the greatest poets of our Victorian time. It must be a strong satisfaction to you, as it is to me, that nine years ago you came forward out of the crowd of people, many of whom ridiculed him while others unjustly neglected him, to declare that you thought him worthy of the best study of his contemporaries, and of all time. It is all very well for people to say now that they have always thought greatly of Browning and

held him in high esteem ; we know too well from the restricted sale of his works, and the opinions once expressed, that this was not the case. We do not want to take more credit to this Society or to ourselves than is due to us, but the effect of the Society's work, and the good it did, was to challenge and compel attention to this great poet. Ours is the only Society ever founded during the life of a poet in the honour of that poet, and for the study of his works. That circumstance alone challenged attention—notwithstanding sneers from fools—to the fact that there was a great poet lying hidden in those works which they had not studied ; and both here and, splendidly, in America an answer was given to that challenge of ours.[1] We did not *make* Browning a great poet ; he *was* a great poet, only people would not listen to him, owing to the superficial difficulty of his expression, and a certain want of music in many of his poems. But as soon as people took him up seriously, he vindicated his right to be the great poet and the noble soul that he was. I think it must have been a satisfaction to every one of us, when we heard the mournful news of the poet's death, that as members of this Society he and she had stood out for this long time his open admirers and open declarers of what his greatness consisted in. We have seen remarks in newspapers and elsewhere, written by silly people who knew not what they were writing,

[1] It has already been shown that America's "answer" to Dr. Furnivall's challenge antedated the challenge.

about the adulation and inconsiderate admiration shown here for Mr. Browning. Every member of the Society knows that the utmost freedom has been used by us in criticising him. As Mr. Revell said in the committee-room this evening, no harder things have been said about Browning than have been said in this Society. But it was because we acknowledged his greatness that we felt ourselves justified in criticising those weaknesses and deficiencies in poetic art which we found in his works, and which we felt limited his usefulness and the appreciation of him by other people. We said in our original prospectus that we would allow the utmost freedom in discussion; we wished it, and it has always been exercised with Mr. Browning's entire approval. He was not one of those men who wanted adulation or servile following: he wanted men to know him; but he knew there must be differences of opinion between himself and his admirers, and he was content to have it so. The mere fact that his great work in the world was the expression of a confident belief in immortality and the existence of his belief in God and the soul, and that I (who with Miss Hickey founded this Society) differed entirely from those views and was a known agnostic, ought to have convinced everybody that there was no stupid flattery used here. But you cannot stop the cackling of geese; we just notice it and pass it by."

The cackling of the "geese" who have found matter for amusement in the methods of the Browning

societies is not, however, wholly directed against their sending a flattering smile on the wayward track of the poet. The explanatory attitude of these organisations is the thing resented by the class who desire no guide in their literary wanderings. The sight of an article in which the meaning of *Andrea del Sarto,* or the value of *Bishop Blougram's Apology,* or the philosophy of *Abt Vogler* is discussed affects them as the sight of a Baedeker affects the passionate pilgrim in the places he most loves. Their contention is admirably stated by Mr. Appleton Morgan in an article in *Science* for May 9, 1890, comparing the relative justification and usefulness of the Shakespeare and Browning societies. The following quotation contains the cream of the argument:

"When the poetry of a certain poet, however magnificent, is merely delineation of, or soliloquy concerning, that of which all the race is tenant in common along with the poet, it would seem as if the organisation of a great society or a learned academy to penetrate that particular poetry or that particular poet, was rather what we call a 'fad' or a crotchet, than a work of any value to anybody. To illustrate the situation by use of an honoured name (to which name I have no wish to allude other than with the highest respect): the death of Mr. Robert Browning has terminated what I think is one of the most wonderful—certainly the most unprecedented—phenomena in literature; namely, the spectacle of a poet writing poetry, and of the simultaneous

organisation on two continents of learned societies to comprehend that poetry as fast as it was written. Indeed, the remark of the witty person—that, just as great physical works are beyond the capacity of individuals, and so must be entrusted to corporations, so the comprehension of Mr. Browning's poetry, being beyond the single intellect, was committed to aggregations of intellect known as 'Browning societies'—appears to have been less a *bon mot,* and much nearer the truth, than had been generally supposed; for Dr. Furnivall tells us why he founded the original Browning Society. 'The main motive for taking the step,' says the excellent Doctor, 'was some talk and writing of a certain cymbal-tinkler being a greater poet (that is, maker) than Browning. I could n't stand that!' which rather appears to be only another way of saying that Browning was in danger of being neglected simply because people could not readily ascertain whether there was anything in him to study; and so that organisations must be formed, not to study something or other that was in him, but to find out if that something or other was there.

"What I propose in this paper is an attempt to show that, unlike the Browning Society, the Shakespeare Society is not an institution of this character, not organised to worship Shakespeare, or to study the Shakespearian method and form: but that it is an institution productive of real benefit, because its purpose is to study the matter (the material) in which Shakespeare deals; because we know that this

matter is in him, without the organisation of any preliminary parsing societies—simply because, so unapproachably simple and coherent and scientific is his form, we are able at a glance to ascertain whether he is worth studying or not.

"Indeed, it would appear, from this very statement of the founder of Browning societies, that he himself perfectly understood that a study of Browning merely meant a study of the particular Browning expression, fashion, method, form (or neglect of form, of which Browning himself boasts in his *The Inn Album*). And, if this were the excellent founder's meaning, we can well understand that he was right: for certainly, if Mr. Browning's own contemporary must quarry in Mr. Browning's poetry—must go at him with pick and spade just as a twenty-second-century grammarian might do, he must not expect the yield he unearths to be any secret of his own century, anything not already his own property in common with Browning himself, anything he did not know before, or could not have procured with less or equal labour elsewhere,—for certainly Mr. Browning had no sources of information, or access to sources of information, which his contemporaries did and do not enjoy, or cannot procure. What the Browning Society occupies itself with, then, must be exactly that which, had Shakespeare societies been organised during Shakespeare's lifetime, or immediately after his death, those societies would have been occupied with as to Shakespeare. The

"Be sure to drink at least two bottles of port wine every day, and after dinner either ride out in a carriage eight or nine miles or lie down and go to sleep on your sofa."

CARICATURE BY ROBERT BROWNING THE ELDER

Shakespeare societies of 1600–16 would have found themselves in precisely the same position as to their poet as are our Browning societies to theirs. Their aim would have necessarily been, not to learn about their own century, about their own manners, their own customs, their own emotions, sensations, habits, and speech, from the writings of one of themselves, but would have been limited simply to a study and interpretation of William Shakespeare's expression of his delineation of those customs, sensations, and emotions."

After a fascinating description of the form taken by Shakespeare's "scientific imagination," the way in which he wrote for that poor and mean and barren stage on which he walked, plays that justified and described "the opulence and summit of dramatic art," and preserved for the societies which should bear his name records of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages whose central figure he was,—the writer asks if any such records of the nineteenth century are to be found in Browning's poetry, if any societies of future centuries will look to him for the folk-lore, the manners, the motley *mise-en-scène* of our present world. The answer, of course, is in the negative. Then are these Browning societies, he asks, anything more than "societies for the working-out of conundrums, or puzzles, or rebuses; not perhaps adult parsing societies, but societies organised to ask what well-known sentiment could Mr. Browning have intended to express in these five words, what perfectly

familiar proposition of morals did he mean to restate by those six, etc. ?"

A negative answer to this question is not even implied—it is left to the reader, and the reader familiar with the work of the most intelligent Browning societies will be able to answer in the affirmative. Nevertheless it is true that this appears to be the rock on which these institutions founder in their voyage toward public respect.

There is a certain excuse for treating Browning in the way that Mr. Morgan approves when Shakespeare is in question, since Browning to all intents and purposes is not a modern poet. A contemporary "going at him with pick and spade" does not, of course, disclose any new thing about our own century, but may, on the other hand, disclose a good many facts about previous centuries with which "the general reader" is not familiar. And Browning societies, like all other literary societies, are much more for "the general reader" than for the expert.

Dr. Berdoe, in his preface to his *Browning Cyclopædia,* declares justly enough that it "would be affectation to pretend to believe that every educated person ought to know, without the aid of such a work as this, what Browning means by phrases and allusions which may be found by hundreds in his works. The wisest reader cannot be expected to remember, even if he has ever learned, a host of remote incidents in Italian history, for example, to say nothing of

classical terms which every schoolboy ought to know, but rarely does."

There is certainly no occasion to animadvert against the pious zeal that annotates and fills out poetry too erudite for human nature's daily food; that provides dictionaries and abridged histories, and articles on technical phraseology. Such work abounds in the published papers of the various Browning societies, and includes the interesting comparison of Browning's *dramatis personæ* with their historic prototypes; and by work of this kind the Browning associates ought, perhaps, to be judged instead of by their avowed intentions.

Their temptation to discard the method of the archæologist and read meanings into poems that speak for themselves is what puts the patience of the public to the test. When Mr. Kirkman advises treatment of "special poems which need a key, being enigmatical, as *Childe Roland,*" and Dr. Berdoe suggests that even an intelligent reader needs help to get "the main purport" of Browning's poems; when Dr. Furnivall is cajoled into analysing the grammatical construction of *Lyric Love* and is obliged finally to explain the whole pathetic poem in prose for those who could not understand it with or without the aid of a grammarian: then the idle public instantly decides that if all that trouble is needed before Browning can be understood the game is not worth the candle; and the readers who love Browning for Browning's sake are reminded of the judge who,

having intimated to the defendant's counsel that the case would probably go in his favour, was yet obliged to listen to a long argument on the side of the defence. "Nevertheless," said the judge at the end, "the court is still with you."

The court is still with Browning, certainly, but whether because or in spite of the efforts of the Browning societies can hardly be determined satisfactorily. It is quite probable that, as Dr. Furnivall believes, the sale of his books was much increased by the agitation of his admirers, and that he came into his own the sooner for their persistency. Whether the reaction balanced the favourable effects is another story to be told by another generation. The championship of contemporary poets has a danger to which Browning's own sentiment expressed in these general terms is pertinent:

> Oh, if we draw a circle premature,
> Heedless of far gain,
> Greedy for quick returns of profit, sure
> Bad is our bargain.

Mark Antony's reflection upon life is reversed in the case of poetry: the good men write lives after them, and the evil may well be interred with their bones. A poet with a touch of genius may safely leave his reputation to posterity; and when we think of Browning's wholesome, manly way of meeting adversity, of the many sides on which he touched happiness, and of the incommunicable flavour of his best work, the picture is undeniably marred by that

astonishing phenomenon of the Browning Society comforting his entirely resolute heart and increasing his adequate income by furthering the sale of his books. His own letter upon the subject, which has frequently been quoted, shows the profound amiability of his nature, prone to feel gratitude and most unready to show rudeness.

"The Browning Society, I need not say, as well as Browning himself, are fair game for criticism," he writes. "I had no more to do with the founding it than the babe unborn, and, as Wilkes was no Wilkesite, I am quite other than a Browning-ite. But I cannot wish harm to a society of, with a few exceptions, names unknown to me, who are busied about my books so disinterestedly. The exaggerations probably come of the fifty-years-long charge of unintelligibility against my books; such reactions are possible, though I never looked for the beginning of one so soon. That there is a grotesque side to the thing is certain, but I have been surprised and touched by what cannot but have been well-intentioned, I think. Anyhow, as I never felt inconvenienced by hard words, you will not expect me to wax bumptious because of undue compliment: so enough of 'Browning,'—except that he is yours very truly, 'while this machine is to him.'"

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